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MURDER MYSTERY MONTHLY

HUNGRY DOG MURDERS

by

FRANK GRUBER

No. 12

COMPLETE and UNEXPURGATED

READING AND RELAXING

TODAY publishers as well as shipbuilders have their part to contribute in our all-out Victory effort. In these trying times we are all under a certain strain and tension. We know that in this war, morale, both in our fighting forces and on the home front, is one of the most potent weapons that we can muster.

★ ★ ★

Reading is one of the great morale builders. Reading helps to clear our minds, hold on to our sense of humor, and establish a fresh and new perspective in dealing with our problems. Publishers generally are trying to do their little part in helping a fighting nation to secure that mental stimulation and enjoyment that disperses fatigue and makes for happier and better fighting men and women.

★ ★ ★

Now is the time to give the best that we have in us. It is our job to keep on our toes — to be in top-notch condition mentally, physically, and morally . . . and one way of doing that is to *Read and Relax.*

★ ★ ★

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What the Critics Say . . .

THE HUNGRY DOG MURDERS

by FRANK GRUBER

" . . . One of the most entertaining mystery writers in this country is Frank Gruber."

Los Angeles Times.

"No more likeable scamps exist in mystery fiction today than Johnny Fletcher, book salesman supreme, and his ex-pugilist pal, Sam Cragg."

Waterbury Republican.

"The Hungry Dog Murders" continues the adventures in crime of Johnny Fletcher and his side-kick, Sam Cragg . . . . Lively, engrossing, humorous — as good as they come."

World-Telegram.

"The author of "The French Key Mystery" etc., comes through again with a first rate mystery novel of the hard-boiled school in THE HUNGRY DOG MURDERS."

N. Y. Sun.

"Chronicling in typical Gruberese the most recent adventures of those daring and unpredictable toughies, Sam Cragg and Johnny Fletcher, the current mystery reveals our heroes in the unusual position of being well heeled . . . Readers meeting Johnny and Sam for the first time will do well to catch up on their case history as related in "The French Key Mystery" etc."

Dorothy Hefling.

This Story . . .

THE HUNGRY DOG MURDERS

Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg have got themselves into strange predicaments, but now wealth, at last, seems to have come to them. Uncle Julius had died, and Sam was the sole heir to everything including two thrilling murders.

This was fine, until Sam, accompanied by Johnny, went to see the estate. There was a large house, a lot of ground, no money and some dogs; not one dog, but two hundred. Every one of them a St. Bernard . . . and they had to be fed.

It wasn't long before Johnny and Sam discovered that Uncle Julius had been something else besides a dog fancier. He had been highly unpopular with a number of people. Soon Sam and Johnny were up to their necks in murder trouble. But this time it took more than smooth talking to get out of it. THE HUNGRY DOG MURDERS is a fine Gruber. There is humor, suspense, a story that moves with hard-punching excitement. Johnny and Sam have never been better.

THE TEXT OF THIS BOOK IS EXACTLY AS PUBLISHED IN THE ORIGINAL EDITION. COMPLETE AND UNEXPURGATED.

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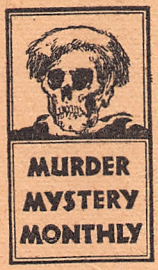
FRANK GRUBER

Drawings by Wm. Frost



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THE HUNGRY DOG
by
FRANK GRUBER

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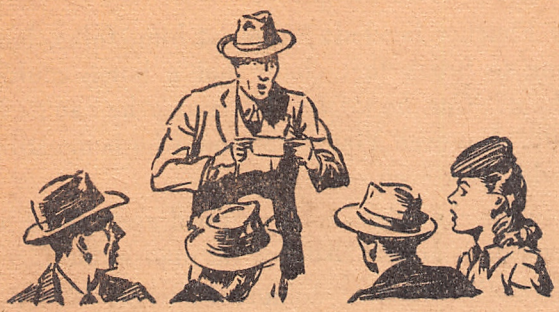
THE HUNGRY DOG MURDERS

CHAPTER ONE



A LITTLE man got up on a box one day at the corner of Broadway and 44th Street and tried to sell dollar bills for seventy-five cents. He got no buyers and after a while began acting so strangely that the men had to come and take him away in the wagon.

Johnny Fletcher had been one of those who passed up the opportunity to buy one-dollar bills at a discount and when he read in the papers the next morning that the little man was crazy and that his bargain bills had actually been genuine, he went out and got himself pleasantly crocked.

And then, the very next day, he was walking down 45th Street and saw a battered straw hat lying on the sidewalk. He gave it a mighty kick — and there was a brick under the hat.

When he was able to walk again he didn't feel so badly about the crazy little man with the dollar bills. In the long run, he felt, you were just as well off to be cynical.

So, today, Johnny Fletcher stood on his own soap box and looked at the sea of skeptical faces and knew that very little money was going to come out of this crowd.

Beside Johnny, Sam Cragg placed his feet wide apart on the sidewalk, crouched and began to inhale. As the air filled his lungs he came slowly up from the crouch. The chain that

was twisted about his massive chest cut into his flesh and his face became red from the strain.

Johnny Fletcher howled: "Look at him, folks, look at him! He's trying to break that chain that a horse couldn't break. Can he do it? *Can he do it?* Of course he can't. No human being could. Not even Young Samson, who is the strongest man in the world. Not even — "

And then the chain broke. It snapped away from Sam Cragg and one end of it almost struck a fat man in the face.

"My Gawd!" screamed Johnny Fletcher. "He did it! He broke that steel chain! He broke it as easily as he did that web belt a minute ago. Do you believe me now? Do you believe that Young Samson is the strongest man in the world? Do *you* want to be strong and healthy? You can be, you can have the kind of muscles that women admire. You can learn the secrets of health that made Young Samson the man he is. They're all in this book, *Every Man a Samson*, that I'm going to pass out to you, not for ten dollars or even five, but a mere, paltry, insignificant $2.95. . . ."

"Yah!" hooted a beetle-browed cynic from west of Tenth Avenue. "It's a fake. The chain's a phony. So's the punk."

"Punk?" challenged Sam Cragg. "Who's a punk?"

"You are, buddy," retorted Beetle Brows, who weighed 240 pounds and was built along the same generous lines of a Percheron horse.

"Don't do it!" Johnny Fletcher cried. "Don't hit him, Sam. You might kill him. . . ."

"Him kill me?" scoffed the heckler. "I useta t'row punks like him every night, when I was rasslin'."

A lad who wore a turtle-necked sweater and was even bigger than Beetle Brows, chimed in. "You said it, Turk. They're a coupla phonies. The loud-mouth, too. If we had the time we'd mop up the street with 'em, that's what we'd do."

"Ahrrr!" choked Sam Cragg, lunging forward.

The two hecklers moved forward to meet Sam. They converged upon him from the right and the left, but what happened when the three bodies met was so quick that no one in the delighted audience quite knew what transpired. They heard a mighty grunting, saw a flurry of thrashing arms, legs and bodies and then saw Sam Cragg emerge with a headlock on each of his opponents, who were howling in pain.

Sam smiled triumphantly at the spectators who were crowded about him, then suddenly brought his two arms together in front of him. The heads of the thugs naturally came along, colliding. The resulting sound was reminiscent of a polo mallet smacking a ball.

Sam released his vanquished foes then, and stepped back. He clapped his hands together in a dusting fashion as the dazed thugs crawled away on hands and knees.

Johnny Fletcher, who had watched the proceedings with an expression of awe on his face, suddenly shook himself and yelled: "D'you see what I mean, folks? Did you see the way Young Samson handled those gorillas? D'you think he's a phony? . . . Yes sir! Here you are, sir. $2.95. And you, sir?

That was all there was to it. Sam Cragg's little exhibition had more effect on the audience than Johnny's ten-minute exhortation. Men crowded about Johnny, clamoring for books and he passed them out with both hands. Five minutes later the entire supply of books was gone and Johnny and Sam melted away with the crowd.

They turned a corner and the two men whom Sam had manhandled stepped out of a doorway.

"Okay, boss?" one of them asked.

Johnny chuckled. "Okay, boys. Here's your money, two bucks apiece. I may be able to use you again tomorrow."

"Sure, we don't mind. It's easy dough for us."

"Wait a minute," Sam Cragg glowered. "One of you birds bit me. That's out, from now on. I don't mind a little horsing around to make it look good, but no biting. Catch on?"

"Sure, Mister," said the man with the turtle-neck sweater. "I didn't mean to bite you, on'y you hurt my Adam's apple there and I forgot myself for a minute."

"Well, don't forget yourself again. On account of *I* might forget myself and bust a couple of noses."

After they had left the pair of hired hecklers, Johnny expanded. "That's one of the best stunts I ever figured out, Sammy. It's doubled the sales of books."

"Swell, Johnny," replied Sam. "This is the way I like to see you. Strictly business and no nonsense. Gosh, when I think of the way we used to live — beatin' landlords out of rent, buyin' things we couldn't pay for and browbeatin' bill collectors. . . . Brrr! It makes me shiver just to think about it."

"Well," said Johnny, "that's not the way I want to live but it's good for the wits. Sharpens them."

They had reached the 45th Street Hotel and turned in. Eddie Miller, the bell captain, saw them and hurried over.

"Look, Mr. Fletcher," he said earnestly. "Something's up. I thought I'd tip you off. All afternoon Peabody's been grinning like a cat in an empty bird cage. It started right after there was a guy here looking for Mr. Cragg."

"A guy looking for Sam?" Johnny asked. "What'd he look like, a dick?"

Sam Cragg scowled. "I didn't do nothing."

The bell captain shrugged. "I don't think he was a cop. Didn't look like one. But he mighta been a — a bill collector."

Johnny brightened. "He couldn't have been. For the first time in our lives we don't owe a cent to anybody. Well, hardly anybody. Anyway, he couldn't have been a bill collector. Sam wouldn't buy anything without asking me first. Or would you, Sam?"

"Oh-oh," said the bell captain. "There's Peabody. Don't tell him . . ." His words trailed off as he moved away.

Mr. Peabody, the manager of the hotel, looked like Basil Rathbone disguised as Peter Lorre. The happiest moments of

his life were those when he could lock out a nonpaying guest from his room. He particularly enjoyed doing that little thing when it was raining or snowing outside.

"Ah, Mr. Fletcher!" he exclaimed. "And Mr. Cragg. How are you both this fine afternoon?"

"Rotten, you hope," Johnny said bluntly. "Come to the point, Peabody. What's on that thing you call a mind?"

Mr. Peabody smiled frostily. "A man was here looking for Cragg. A lawyer. . . ."

"A lawyer? What was his name?"

"Hofnagel. He left his card; here it is. He also left word that Cragg was to get in touch with him immediately . . . or else."

Johnny snatched the card from the hotel manager's hand and thrust it at Sam Cragg. "Or else, nothing! No lawyer's got anything on us. Go ahead, Sam. Give this shyster a jingle. And use the desk phone, just so Peabody'll know we're on the up and up."

Sam's forehead creased as he studied the card. "I never heard of this Hofnagel, Johnny. You s'pose? . . ."

"No. Nobody's got a thing on us — now. We don't have to be afraid of any lawyer or cop." He glared at Mr. Peabody.

Sam caressed the telephone receiver for a moment, then sighing, picked it up. When the connection was made, he said: "Mr. Hofnagel? This is Samuel Cragg calling. I understand you were looking for me. . . . What? . . . What? . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

JOHNNY, watching, saw the color recede from the big fellow's face. Then Sam suddenly swayed a little and the phone dropped out of his hand.

Johnny leaped forward. "What is it, Sam?"

Sam's eyes rolled wildly. He gulped in air, tried to talk and had to gulp again. Then he choked out, "Uncle Julius has kicked the gong. He — he's left me his entire estate. . . ."

Johnny gasped. "Why, that's great. I mean . . . I'm sorry, Sam, about your uncle."

Sam shook his head dazedly. "Sorry for Uncle Julius? Cripes! You don't have to feel sorry about the old boy. Not him. But — the — the estate, Johnny. . . ."

Johnny ran his tongue around his dry lips, then caught sight of Peabody, hovering over them. The hotel manager's face was the color of moldy bread.

Johnny's nostrils flared.

"How much does it amount to, Sam?"

"Why . . ." Johnny gulped. "The lawyer didn't know. But he said Uncle Julius was pretty well heeled."

Mr. Peabody thrust forward his hand. "Mr. Cragg, may I be the first to congratulate you? I don't know anyone I'd rather wish such good luck to."

Sam Cragg looked at Peabody's hand, but didn't take it.

"Yah," he said. "I remember. You wished me good luck the time you stuck a French key in our door."

Johnny made a motion with his hands that was very much like a man dusting lint from his clothes. "One side, Peabody. I don't think we know you."

He took Sam's arm and steered him toward the elevators. On the eighth floor they stepped out and went to Room 821. Inside the room, Johnny said crisply: "All right, now, Sam, was that straight goods?"

"So help me, Johnny! He's coming over here with some papers and things."

"When?"

"Right away, he said. Umm, he said something about I'd have to go to St. Louis. That's where Uncle Julius lived."

"Nice town, St. Louis. I always liked it." A dreamy look came into Johnny's eyes. "Tell me about this Uncle Julius. You never talked much about him."

"That's because I didn't know him. Last time I saw him I was about twelve years old. I remember my mother didn't like him very much. I'm surprised he left me his dough."

"Money," said Johnny. "Ah, the fun we're going to have spending it!"

"*We*, Johnny?"

Johnny grinned. "Now, Sammy, you know you wouldn't be able to get the most out of your money without me to advise you."

"Oh, wouldn't I? With the horses running at Hialeah next month — "

"You see!" exclaimed Johnny. "That's what I mean. You inherit a bag of gold and right away you want to squander it on the nags." He shook his head sadly. "Don't you have any appreciation of the finer things? Now, my idea of spending a fortune is to buy a beautiful country estate. A nice colonial mansion with a broad veranda on which I can lie in a hammock, drinking mint juleps. . . ."

"Hold it!" Sam exclaimed. "Here he is!"

Knuckles pounded the thin door panels and Sam Cragg sprang to the door. He opened it and leaped back quickly as a bundle of fur on a leash snapped at him.

"What the hell!" Sam snapped. He retreated before the dog, a little black Scottie, and Johnny brushed past him and reached for the attorney's hand.

"You Mr. Cragg?" the attorney snapped.

"He is," Johnny said smoothly, "but I'm his business manager. Let's see, you're Mr. — er, Mr. . . ."

"Harold Hofnagel. Riley, Ryan, Riordan and Potts, of St. Louis, have asked me to represent them in this matter." Mr. Hofnagel came into the room and Sam Cragg slipped around the far side of the bed.

Hofnagel looked puzzled and Johnny explained quickly. "It's the dog, Mr. Hofnagel. Sam was bit by one once and he's been allergic to them ever since."

Mr. Hofnagel took in Sam Cragg's 220 pounds and then his eyes dropped scornfully to the little animal, who seemed to recognize Sam Cragg's weakness and was straining at the leash, to get at Sam.

Johnny chuckled. Dogs were like that about Sam. They went out of their way to snarl and snap at him and the big fellow, who would have tackled a gorilla barehanded, was afraid of the puny canines.

Mr. Hofnagel sniffed and drew a manila envelope from his pocket. "I just want to verify one or two things, Mr. Cragg. What is your full name?"

Sam shot a quick glance at Johnny Fletcher. Then he scowled truculently. "Samuel Cedric Cragg."

"Cedric," said Johnny softly. "Samuel Cedric!"

The attorney nodded. "And your father's full name?"

"Samuel Clarence Cragg. He gave me the Cedric in revenge because his father called him Clarence."

"And you were born where, Mr. Cragg?"

"Bad Ax, Montana."

Mr. Hofnagel smacked his lips. "That checks. I guess there's no doubt that you're the real Samuel C. Cragg. I am happy to inform you, therefore, that you are the legal heir of your uncle, Julius Philander Cragg."

Johnny cleared his throat. "That's swell, Mr. Hofnagel. Uh — is the estate a big one? I mean, how much cash is there?"

The attorney gave Johnny a cold look. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potts didn't give me the details, except to say that there was a rather large country home and considerable acreage. . . ."

Johnny's eyes lit up. "Why, that's fine. Isn't it, Sam?"

"It certainly is. I sure appreciate what Uncle Julius did for me."

"He did nothing for you," said Mr. Hofnagel. "Except die."

"Well, that was something," said Sam, then catching Johnny's eye, "I mean, it's tough, about the old boy. When'd he kick the — I mean, when did he pass on?"

"About a month ago, I believe."

"A month? And you're just now notifying me?"

Mr. Hofnagel sniffed. "Do you know how we located you? We advertised in all the personal columns of the newspapers and it wasn't until today that we received a reply. And that was from the police department. One of the officers who said he was familiar with your, er, record — gave me your address."

"Record!" cried Sam. "I haven't got any police record." He finished under his breath, "not in this town."

"S'all right," Johnny said soothingly. "He was kidding. Your informant was Lieutenant Madigan, no doubt."

"Why, yes. You know him, personally?"

"I've solved a couple of his tough cases for him," said Johnny modestly. "I mean, Sam and I did. That's how Madigan knows us. Well, Mr. Hofnagel, we — Sam, I mean, thanks you for everything and if we — if he can do anything for you any time, just call on him."

"Sure," said Sam, starting around the bed with his hand stuck

out. "Any time, Mr. Hof — Ouch!" He had forgotten the Scottie and the animal, which had been lying in wait, made a sudden leap for Sam's leg. Only the fact that the leash was too short saved Sam. But he retreated to the other side of the bed and finished his good-byes from there.

At the door, Mr. Hofnagel said: "You'll be leaving for St. Louis shortly then, Mr. Cragg?"

"Maybe tonight," Johnny replied for Sam.

"Good. I'll wire Mr. Potts to that effect." He jerked his Scottie dog through the door and Johnny let it swing shut. Then he whirled upon Sam.

"It's true, Sammy, old boy!" he yelped. "We're country gentlemen! Throw our duds together so we can start for St. Louis."

CHAPTER THREE

COMING out of their luxurious drawing room into the grimy vastness of the ancient depot in St. Louis was a distinct contrast that, under any circumstances, would have been depressing to Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg. Today, however, everything looked good to them.

Johnny handed a dollar to the redcap who carried their bags into the waiting room. He said, then, to Sam: "Well, shall we check into a hotel or go see Mr. Potts right away?"

"Potts," said Sam Cragg. "What's the use of going to a hotel when we can go right out to the estate?"

"Right. Why don't you give his office a ring, just to be sure he's in? Then we'll run right over."

Sam Cragg nodded and went to a telephone booth. When he came out a moment later, there was a frown on his face.

"Jeez, Johnny, there ain't no one at the office. It's after five."

Johnny groaned. "Is his home address listed in the phone book?"

"I looked; there are eighteen Pottses."

Johnny swore. "Damn. Well, do you know where your uncle Julius' place is?"

"It's out in the country, somewhere near Kirkwood. I'll look it up."

He trotted back to the battery of phone booths and consulted

a directory. Johnny, watching, saw him nod in satisfaction. When he came back, he said:

"Deming Road, Kirkwood. Why don't we run right out there?"

"That's exactly what we're going to do, Sammy. Might as well take over right away."

"Fine, Johnny. I'll ask about busses."

"Nix," Johnny said, "we'll go out in style. A taxi."

Sam shrugged and they carried their bags out to Market Street and dumped them into a cab. Climbing in, Johnny said, "Kirkwood, my man."

The cabby's head swiveled about. "Did you say Kirkwood? That's a pretty long haul."

"Fine," said Johnny. "I like a nice drive. Make it through the park, eh?"

The cabby jerked his taxi down Eighteenth Street to Locust, then turned west. Ten minutes later he shot across Kingshighway and entered the winding drives of Forest Park. Coming out at High Point he continued to Big Bend Road, then turned south to Manchester.

At this point the meter read $5.95 and Sam's eyes remained on it, fascinated.

"Relax, Sam," Johnny said sharply. "We can afford it. We're in the money."

"I know," said Sam, shaking his head. "But it's hard to get used to."

Johnny grunted. "Maybe we'll get a Cadillac and a chauffeur — if the estate's a big one. If it isn't, we'll just get a Cadillac."

The cab rolled through Webster Groves and reaching the town limits of Kirkwood, the meter clicked an even $7.00. At this point the driver inquired the way to Deming Road.

It was getting dark and after receiving instructions the cab proceeded. Past Highway 66, the driver switched on his spotlight and watched the signposts. After about two miles he sud-

denly swung right, onto a macadam road.

"This is it, Gents," he cried.

"Swell," said Johnny. "Now look at the mail boxes. When you see one with the name Julius Cragg, that's us."

It was the third mail box on the right, less than half a mile from Manchester Road. Johnny murmured in awe as he looked at the huge, rambling house that loomed up in the early twilight. It was a colonial type, of at least ten rooms.

"Not bad," he said, "not bad at all."

"Jeez," said Sam, in awe. "Uncle Julius musta been heeled."

"And it's all yours, Sammy old pal, all yours."

"That'll be eight forty-five," said the cabby.

Johnny handed him a ten-dollar bill and waved away the change. "Buy yourself a new set of tires," he said loftily.

The big house was set back some thirty or forty yards from the road. A sturdy fence of meshed wire surrounded the house and broad expanse of lawn.

Johnny opened the gate and with Sam started up the macadam drive and then a dog began barking. The hoarseness of its baying sent a little chill running up Johnny's spine and as for Sam — well, Sam just turned and headed back for the gate.

"Come back, you coward," Johnny cried. "He isn't going to eat you up. . . . Hello, there, Sport, how are you? Lay down, doggie. . . ."

At that moment the porch lights went on and Johnny saw the animal in front of the house. Only terror kept him from whirling and pursuing Sam back to the road.

The dog was the biggest St. Bernard Johnny had ever seen in his life. He was smaller than a horse, but not much. He stood on the doorstep as if to repel all boarders.

"Hello, the house," Johnny called nervously.

The door opened and a slender man came out and spoke to the dog. "All right, Oscar." Then to Johnny, "What do you want?"

"The place," Johnny retorted. "We're the new owners."

"Nuts," said the man behind the dog.

"Sam," cried Johnny. "Come up here and tell him who you are."

"Call off the dog," yelled Sam, from down by the gate. "I'm Sam Cragg, Uncle Julius' nephew."

That had the desired effect. The man on the veranda came forward and twisted his hand into the St. Bernard's shaggy fur.

"H'arya, Cragg," he said. "I'm George Tompkins."

"Glad to know you, George," Johnny said cheerfully. "You got a good grip on the mutt?"

Tompkins laughed. "Oscar wouldn't hurt a flea. C'mon up."

Johnny approached the veranda, then turned to watch Sam. The big fellow came forward, mincingly, his eyes riveted on the huge dog. When he came to the door he turned sidewards, hesitated a moment and then suddenly sprang through the opening.

Johnny followed, then Tompkins came. It wasn't until they were all in the house that Johnny saw that Tompkins wasn't a man at all but just a boy, a rather tall, slender boy, but certainly not more than eighteen or nineteen.

He said flippantly, "Hi Cragg. Old Potts wasn't expecting you until Monday. But this is it, so make yourself at home."

Johnny looked around the living room. It was immense, at least forty feet long and more than half that in width. There was a huge wood-burning fireplace at one side.

Sam was surveying the room, too, and his eyes lingered over every piece of furniture as if appraising its value. He kept nodding his head.

The boy, George Tompkins, chuckled: "Not bad, is it, Cragg?"

"Uh?" Sam shook his head. "It's pretty good. Uh . . . I didn't get the name outside?"

"George Tompkins," the youth replied. " You know."

Sam looked blank. "I know what?"

"Why, who I am."

"We'll bite," Johnny cut in. "Who are you?"

The boy's eyes narrowed. "Didn't he ever tell you? Your uncle. . . ."

Sam's eyes widened. "You mean you're . . . his kid? Hell, he never wrote the family. I never even knew he was married. . . ."

"He wasn't. I'm not his son. I mean . . . not his real son."

Johnny pursed up his lips. "You mean — adopted?"

Tompkins started to nod, then shrugged. "Well, I've lived with him for the last six years. He talked some about adopting me, but he never got around to it."

Sam Cragg looked at Johnny in bewilderment. Johnny said: "That's okay by us, George. You don't have to worry about a thing."

"But I *am* worrying," George Tompkins said calmly. "I'm worrying about you, Mister. Where you fit in."

Johnny frowned. "I'm Johnny Fletcher. Sam and I are like that." He held up his index and middle fingers.

George did not seem impressed. "Yeah? Where do you get the 'us' stuff — about this layout? You cutting in on Cragg?"

"Ha-ha," Johnny laughed mirthlessly.

Sam came to Johnny's aid. "It's okay, George. Johnny and me have split everything for the last fifteen years. He's given me the shirt off his back, many times."

"When it was dirty?"

Johnny gave the boy a sharp look. "Now, Sonny. . . ."

"Sonny!" exclaimed George Tompkins.

"Take it easy, Kid," Sam Cragg said soothingly. "You're pretty young, you know, and Johnny — "

"I'm twenty-one," George blurted out. "And I'm no kid. Why . . ." he looked scornfully at Johnny Fletcher. "I probably know as much about what makes this old apple go around as you two."

Johnny drew a deep breath. "Well, now," he said disarmingly, "I wouldn't be surprised if you did. Look, Tompkins, I think I know how you feel about this business. Old Julius

sort of gave you the idea that he was going to leave you his money, didn't he?"

George pouted sullenly, but made no comment. Sam Cragg looked shrewdly at Johnny Fletcher and said: "Buck up, Kid, I'll see that you get a piece of the dough. . . ."

"What dough?" Tompkins asked.

Sam Cragg blinked. "Uncle Julius'," he began then stopped and sent a strange glance at Johnny Fletcher, who was holding his breath.

He let it out slowly. "Repeat that, Tompkins."

"I said, what dough?"

"That's what I thought you said." Johnny took a step forward. "You mean Sam's uncle didn't leave any money? . . ."

George Tompkins' mouth twisted into a wicked grin. Then he began to chuckle. In the middle of it, bedlam broke loose outside the house. The St. Bernard dog began barking furiously; someone honked vigorously with an automobile horn and then, from the rear of the house came the most awful sound Johnny Fletcher had ever heard in his life: the baying of a thousand hounds.

Sam Cragg cried out in horror. "What's that?"

"The dogs," roared George Tompkins.

"How many dogs?" Johnny lashed at him.

"Two hundred. Two hundred and every blessed one as big as Oscar."

"Omigod!" whispered Sam Cragg. He reeled and sat down heavily in an armchair.

Johnny Fletcher's mouth twitched. "You mean to say, Tompkins, that there are two hundred St. Bernard dogs on this place?"

Outside the automobile horn was blowing insistently, but the sound of it was almost drowned out by the racket of the dogs.

CHAPTER FOUR

GEORGE TOMPKINS moved toward the front door. "That's what Cragg's inheritance consists of — two hundred nice, gentle St. Bernard dogs. Two hundred of 'em, each eating about five pounds of meat a day. . . ."

He opened the front door and spoke sharply to the St. Bernard. "It's all right, Oscar." Then he called to the automobile. "Shut up with that horn and the dogs'll stop."

They did, after a while, and then the callers came into the house. There were two, a weazened, pasty-faced man of about fifty who wore a tan linen suit and a girl of about twenty-one or twenty-two, an extremely attractive girl, Johnny Fletcher thought. She was tall and slender, had blond hair and was wearing a chiffon dress that seemed to have been designed for her exclusively.

The man said testily: "Do those dogs cut up like that every time someone calls here?"

George Tompkins said, "Hello, Susie, thought you said you were particular about the company you kept?"

The girl's mouth widened as she inhaled sharply. "George! . . ."

Tompkins grinned. "S'all right. Look, Potts, this is your heir. The big one. The other one's his guardian."

Johnny rubbed the knuckles of his right hand with the palm

of his left. He wondered if there was a law against slapping down children who were too smart for their years.

Potts, the lawyer, swooped down on Sam Cragg. "Mr. Cragg, why didn't you let me know you were coming? I would have met you at the train."

Sam said truculently: "What's this about two hundred dogs?"

"Why, they're your inheritance. Isn't it splendid? Such marvelous, big fellows. . . ."

Tompkins snickered. "Cragg's scared of dogs. . . . The sissy!"

"Excuse me," murmured the girl. "I think I'll run home."

"Stick around, Susie," Tompkins chuckled wickedly, "there'll be some laughs."

"Ha-ha," said Johnny Fletcher. "There might be, at that — if I give you a slap or two on the kisser."

Potts, the attorney, released Sam Cragg's big hand which he had been pumping and turned to young Tompkins. "George," he said, "I've had a certain sympathy for you, up to now, but if you're going to continue like this, I'm afraid that I'll have to wash my hands of you."

"Whoa," said Johnny Fletcher. "Let's start at the beginning. By introducing ourselves all around. I'm Johnny Fletcher."

He smiled at Potts, the lawyer, a question in his eyes. The attorney took the cue. "This is Miss Susan Webb, your nearest neighbor."

"Right across the road," smiled the girl.

"That's fine," Johnny said enthusiastically. "We'll be delighted to have you run over now and then, won't we, Sam?"

The smile faded from Susan Webb's face. "That won't be very often — Mr. Fletcher."

"No?"

She flushed. "Why don't you come right out and ask me what business I have here?"

"All right, I'll ask."

George Tompkins cut in nastily, "Quite a pal you've got, Charlie McCragg."

Sam was thinking that over, when Johnny Fletcher walked purposefully toward the insolent youth. The girl saved him. She stepped in front of Johnny and laid her hand on his arm.

"Please!" she said sharply. "You don't understand about — George."

"Cut it out, Sue," snapped Tompkins. "I can fight my own battles."

"You get enough practice," she lashed at him. "That's why I came here tonight with Mr. Potts. You've got to stop it, George."

"Hey!" exclaimed Sam Cragg. "I just figured out that Charlie McCragg gag. Listen, squirt, that'll be about all from you."

"He talks," said Tompkins. "He walks and talks . . . and he's afraid of dogs."

"I'm mad," Sam Cragg said, "but I'll hold it back — for a minute. Until I find out some things. Mr. Potts, does my uncle's entire estate consist of these dogs? . . ."

"They're the best St. Bernards on the North American continent," Potts snapped. "Your uncle won more blue ribbons with them than all breeders combined. The Cragg Kennels are known wherever dogs are known."

"All right," Cragg admitted, "but what is there besides the hounds?"

Young Tompkins moved forward. "Cragg's allergic to dogs. Old Oscar scared the pants off him."

"I don't like dogs," Sam admitted uncomfortably. "When I was a kid a mutt almost chewed off one of my legs and ever since — "

"A big man like you," Potts said scornfully.

Sam glowered. "I can lick any two men you know. . . ."

Potts looked at Sam's big body as if it were something repulsive. Tompkins beat him to the comment. "Arthur Brisbane's gorilla could lick six like you, Cragg."

Sam bared his teeth. "All right, punk, you're asking for it."

"Whoa!" cried Johnny. "First thing you know we're going to get mad at each other here and that won't do at all. Are we to understand, Mr. Potts, that Julius Cragg's entire estate consists of these two hundred Shetland ponies — I mean, St. Bernard dogs?"

"Oh, no, not at all. There's this house and the land, some forty acres, worth $20,000, even in today's market."

"Ah," said Johnny.

Potts continued: "Of course, there's a fifteen-thousand-dollar mortgage on it."

Johnny groaned. "But what about the dough? The do-re-mi? How much is there in the bank?"

"Less than a hundred dollars."

Johnny inhaled deeply. "Well, folks, it's been nice meeting you."

Sam moved quickly to Johnny's side. "I never liked Uncle Julius anyway. The last time I saw him was when I was twelve years old and he tanned the back of my lap and all I did was put an egg in his coat pocket and bump against him. So long, Mr. Potts . . ."

"So long, Cragg," George Tompkins said. "I'll remember you to the dogs."

Sam Cragg turned back. His nostrils were flaring and his teeth clenched so hard muscles stood out on the side of his jaws.

"How many dogs are there, punk?"

"Two hundred," retorted Tompkins. "Two hundred *big* dogs."

"Only *two* hundred? That's different. I thought you said two thousand. I'm not afraid of two hundred dogs. I'll stick. Bring out your papers, Potts."

Johnny opened his mouth to protest, then a thought struck him. "How much is a high-class St. Bernard dog worth, Tompkins?"

The wind seemed to have spilled out of young Tompkins'

sails. "Whatever you can get for him, two hundred, maybe five hundred."

"Say!" cried Johnny Fletcher, "*that's* different."

Gerald Potts, the attorney, paused at the door. "Mr. Cragg, may I offer you just one suggestion? I wouldn't try to avenge your uncle's death."

"Huh?"

Potts nodded. "The police assured me only yesterday that they're working actively on the case and expect to make an arrest at any moment."

Sam gasped. "What've the cops got to do with Uncle Julius?"

"Yeah, how did Uncle Julius die?" Johnny chimed in.

Potts looked around the little group. "I thought you knew, otherwise I wouldn't have brought it up at this time. Your uncle was . . . murdered. . . ."

"Murdered?" cried Sam Cragg. His startled eyes went to Johnny Fletcher.

"Yes," Potts went on, "he was shot down in cold blood, right on his own doorstep."

"Three bullets," young Tompkins added. "One in the leg, one smack in the kisser and another — "

"Shut your trap!" Johnny Fletcher snarled. "Who shot him?"

"That's what the police are working on. As I understand it, Mr. Cragg was called to the door early one evening — May 24th. Mrs. Binns, the housekeeper, heard the shots but when she came out, all she could see was the taillight of an automobile. . . ."

"What became of Mrs. Binns?"

George Tompkins replied. "Nothing. She's still here."

"Where?"

"Upstairs. Her and Old Man Binns hit the hay right after supper."

"I suppose," Johnny said sarcastically, "old man Binns is her husband and is around eighty."

"Uh-uh, he isn't more than half that."

"Forty, then. I suppose that's old to an infant of twenty-one."

"Look, Johnny," said Sam Cragg suddenly. "He was *my* uncle. I'm willing to call the whole thing off. Let's beat it."

"Don't be a sap, Sam. This is just getting interesting."

Sam groaned. "Here we go again! We're detectives. And when it's all over, we'll be broke and hungry. It's always ended like that."

"Quiet, Sam," Johnny snapped. "I want to get this all straight. Mr. Potts, you were Mr. Cragg's attorney before his death, weren't you?"

"That's right. I handled all of his legal affairs for the last ten years."

"Then you ought to know all about him. What sort of a man was he?"

"Oh, he was about fifty or so. Stoutish, I'd say."

"Skip the physical description. Tell me about his business affairs. How long was he in this dog racket? Did he make any money off it? How'd he get into it in the first place?"

Potts moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Why, I really can't answer all those questions. I know that Mr. Cragg was very fond of dogs. He liked all dumb animals — "

George Tompkins snickered. "Why don't you stop beating about the bush, Mr. Potts, and tell them the truth. Old Julius was about as smooth as they came. He welshed on a pay-off and he got what a welsher usually gets. A bunch of lead in his — "

"Look, sonny," said Johnny Fletcher. "I didn't like you when I first came in and now I like you even less. I think it's time for children to be in bed and if you don't say nighty-night right away I'm going to slap your ears down."

"You and who else?" blustered young Tompkins.

"And me!" cried Sam Cragg. He made a sudden lunge toward the boy, but the latter skipped blithely away. At the door leading to the rear of the house, he paused for a last shot.

"Tell them about me, Potts. See how they like that."

CHAPTER FIVE

"WHAT about him?" Johnny asked when Tompkins had disappeared.

Potts frowned. "I don't know. I was under the impression that Mr. Cragg had legally adopted the boy and I was considerably surprised to learn that he hadn't. Your uncle's death, Mr. Cragg, was a severe blow to the boy. He'd looked upon his guardian as his father and then when Mr. Cragg died he was left high and dry."

Johnny frowned. "You mean George had expected to inherit Mr. Cragg's estate?"

"That's about the size of it, I'm afraid," replied Potts. "For that matter, I'm sure Mr. Cragg intended to provide for him. He simply wouldn't make a will, however. I advised him to do so on several occasions, but he never wanted to discuss the matter . . . thought it too sordid. So he just ran along and then — well, it left the boy unprovided for."

"If you ask me," growled Sam, "it wouldn't hurt the punk any to go out and get himself a job. He's old enough to work and he's too damn smart to suit me."

"Oh, that's where you're wrong, Mr. Cragg," cut in Susan Webb. "George wasn't like that before your uncle was kil — died. He — he was very fond of Mr. Cragg. He's grieving terribly and to hide it, pretends that he is worldly-wise and cynical."

"Well," said Johnny Fletcher, "I'm a graduate of the old razor-strop school. The last time I sassed my old man I was just about young Tompkins' age and I got three teeth knocked out of my mouth."

"I think," said Susan Webb, coldly, "I'll go home."

"Good night, Miss Webb."

She went to the door, opened it and stepped out. Johnny was about to follow and apologize, but Gerald Potts signaled him to wait. When the door closed after the girl, the lawyer cleared his throat.

"She lives directly across the road. I — er, wanted to explain her position."

"She's soft on the kid?"

The attorney shrugged. "I believe it's the maternal instinct more than anything else. She's older than young Tompkins. But — that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. It's her father. You see, if any person could have been called an enemy of your late uncle's, Mr. Cragg, it's James Webb."

"Huh? You mean maybe the girl's old man knocked off Uncle Julius?"

"No, positively not. But . . . well, there was bad feeling between them. The dogs were mainly responsible for that, I'm afraid. Mr. Webb was here first and he seemed to resent your uncle's stocking his place with, er, the kind of livestock he did."

Johnny grinned crookedly. "You mean the dogs drove the neighbors nuts?"

"Well, they *are* a bit noisy at times, you know. Fact of the matter is, Mr. Webb tried to get out an injunction against Julius. He couldn't, of course. This isn't within the incorporated limits of any town and Mr. Cragg had as much right to raise dogs as another man has to raise horses or cows."

"Or hogs," said Johnny. "So how far did Webb and Julius go?"

"Pretty far, I'm afraid. A dog was shot one time and on an-

other occasion several of the animals were poisoned. Only prompt veterinary attention saved them."

Johnny whistled. "The girl's old man?"

"Mr. Cragg accused him of it and Webb denied it."

"They say the first world war was started over a dog," Johnny said.

Mr. Potts did not smile at the joke. He scowled. "Then young Tompkins began meeting Miss Webb here and there. Webb learned about it and said some rather harsh things to the boy."

"I don't blame Webb for *that*," Sam Cragg declared.

Johnny drew a deep breath. "Now, look, Mr. Potts, thanks for all the dope you've given us. But what about the other angle — the one the kid mentioned. What was this bet Mr. Cragg welshed on? . . ."

Gerald Potts' face twisted and he began moving toward the door. "I don't know a thing about that. Mr. Cragg's personal affairs were his own. I never questioned him. . . ."

"Uncle Julius was a bookie, wasn't he? The kid let that slip."

"Mr. Cragg was interested in horses . . . to a certain extent. But as for his being a bookie — bookmaker, why I couldn't say. I never pried . . ."

"You said that, Potts. Come clean, now, Sam's the old boy's nephew and heir. He has a right to know. . . ."

"It's late," said Potts crisply, "and I've a long way to drive. Good night."

"Hey," said Sam, "where do *we* bunk?"

"I'll show you," said a quiet voice from the door through which young Tompkins had gone a few minutes ago.

They all turned. A dark-haired woman wearing a woolly robe stood in the doorway. "I'm Mrs. Binns, the housekeeper," she explained.

"Ah yes," said Johnny. "And where's Mr. Binns?"

"He'll be here in a moment." She had scarcely got the words out of her mouth than a sullen, heavy-set man appeared beside her. He was wearing overalls and a denim jacket.

"I'm Arthur Binns."

"Good evening, Binns," Potts said. "This is Mr. Cragg and Mr. Fletcher."

Binns bobbed his head but did not speak. His wife said: "I'll show you upstairs."

Potts took his departure and since there seemed to be nothing else to do Johnny and Sam let themselves be led upstairs.

There seemed to be four bedrooms on the second floor, two on each side of a wide hall.

"We were only expecting Mr. Cragg," Mrs. Binns explained, "so I only got the one room ready, but if you can wait a few minutes — "

"S'all right, Mrs. Binns," said Johnny. "I'll bunk in with Mr. Cragg. We've done it before."

It was a large room with a double bed and an adjoining bath. After Mrs. Binns had gone, Sam Cragg went deliberately to the door and shot the bolt.

"What's that for?" Johnny asked.

"Some people might not know Uncle Julius is dead."

Johnny shook his head. "This uncle of yours was quite a lad, eh? Funny, we never ran across him in our travels."

"It's a big country. Well, Johnny, what do you think of the layout?"

"What do *you* think of it?"

"You know the answer to that. I don't like it. Two hundred mutts, each as big as a horse. I only hope they don't let them run loose around the place."

"St. Bernards are gentle dogs," said Johnny. "So I've heard."

"You're not sure, though?"

"Pretty sure. Stop worrying about them. You heard what the squirt said about them, didn't you? That they're worth an average of two hundred bucks. There's no law says you can't sell them."

Sam brightened. "How much is two hundred times two hundred?"

"Forty thousand, Sam. I figured that out downstairs."

Sam whistled. "Not bad, Johnny. I'm going to sell the mutts right away and we'll clear out of here."

"Who are you going to sell the dogs to?"

"Huh? Why, a lot of people buy dogs. You see them everywhere."

"Sure, but how many are St. Bernards? My hunch is that it's going to take a little while to sell off two hundred pooches."

"How long?"

"Oh, maybe two or three weeks."

Sam took off his coat and threw it across the room. "Two or three weeks, damn! I know just what you're thinking about, Johnny. That'll give you a chance to play detective again."

"Well, don't you want to bring the murderer of your uncle to justice?"

"No. I'm willing to let things stand as they are. And I wish to hell you'd do the same, Johnny. I can't stand to have things happen to us again. We're sitting pretty. We've got a little dough left and if you can behave for two or three weeks, we can pick up forty grand. Just think what we could do with that down in Florida!"

Johnny peeled off his coat and trousers and opened his suitcase. He brought out striped pyjamas. "All right, Sam, stop squawking. I'm not going out of my way looking for trouble. Get to bed. I didn't sleep well on that train last night."

A couple of minutes later they climbed into the double bed and switched out the light. After a moment Sam Cragg sat up suddenly.

"Cripes, Johnny, I just thought of something. How much meat does a St. Bernard dog eat in a day?"

"Oh, about five pounds."

"What?" howled Sam. "Two hundred mutts and five pounds a day. Why . . . why, that's a thousand pounds a day! Who's going to pay for that meat?"

"You are. Now, shut up and let me sleep."

CHAPTER SIX

THE sun streaming through the bedroom windows awakened Johnny. He lay for a moment looking at the ceiling, then with an exclamation leaped from bed.

"Up, Sammy, old boy!" he cried. "There's a big day ahead of us."

Sam mumbled and groaned. Johnny caught up his pillow and whacked Sam with it. The latter cursed and sat up. He blinked sleepily at Johnny.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing, Sam. You're an heir. Get up and look over your heritage."

Sam shook his head and looked about the room. He swung his feet to the floor, then exclaimed in consternation, "I just remembered, Johnny. That ton of meat for the dogs. . . ."

"Forget it, Sam. Maybe they don't eat meat at all."

"What would they eat?"

"Hay, maybe. There's forty acres of land here and they probably raise the stuff."

"I don't believe it. I never heard of a dog eating hay."

"Neither did I. But if your uncle could feed that herd of pachyderms I guess you can, too."

Johnny rolled up his pyjamas and hurled them at Sam. Then

he ran to the bathroom. When he came out after a cold shower, Sam was dressed.

"Mrs. Binns just knocked. Breakfast is ready."

"So am I — in a minute."

Johnny dressed swiftly, then when he was finished they went downstairs to the living room. From the dining room came the odor of hot coffee and fried bacon. They went in.

George Tompkins was sipping black coffee while he read the *Globe-Democrat.* "Morning," he said, without looking up from his paper.

Johnny winked at Sam, then leaning over pretended to read an item on the back of the page George was reading. He craned his neck, took hold of the paper and whisked it out of Tompkins' hand.

The boy yelped. "Say, what's the idea?"

"Little boys shouldn't read at the table," Johnny replied. He seated himself and began skimming the front page of the newspaper.

"You've got a nerve," George said angrily.

"So've you," Johnny retorted. "And you're altogether too fresh for a kid." He folded the paper and threw it across the room. "So now we understand each other, let's get down to business. You want to hang around here — you've got to behave yourself."

"What've *you* got to say about it?" George snapped. "Cragg's the lord and master here."

"What Johnny says goes double for me, Kid," growled Sam.

George turned a bitter face toward Sam Cragg. "All right, if that's the way you feel about it, I'll get out. I haven't got any place to go, but I can join the army. They'll give me three square meals a day."

"Wait a while and you won't have to enlist," Johnny said. "They'll draft you."

For once, George had no retort. He toyed with a piece of

toast for a moment, then got up and left the room. Johnny and Sam pitched into the breakfast.

When they had finished, Johnny said heartily, "Now, let's go out and look the place over."

Sam winced. "The dogs?"

"And other things. Cheer up, they keep the hounds in kennels." Johnny led the way to the kitchen.

Arthur Binns got up quickly from a chair. "Like to see the dogs, Mr. Cragg?"

"No," Sam replied curtly.

"Yes," Johnny said.

Binns opened the kitchen door and a huge animal got up from the ground and lumbered toward them. Sam remained in the doorway.

"Why don't you chain that up?"

"Oscar?" Binns asked. "Why, he's as gentle as a lamb. Aren't you, Oscar?" He caught the gigantic dog's jaws and pried them open.

Sam Cragg, from his vantage point looked into the gaping cavern and shuddered. "Jeez, if he took a bite of a fellow . . ."

"He's never bit anyone yet."

Johnny took a deep breath and walked toward the dog. He patted its head gingerly. "Look, Sam, he's as tame as a cat. Come on."

Sam came grudgingly from the kitchen door, but he detoured around Oscar, the St. Bernard. The animal looked curiously at Sam, then lumbered along behind him. Sam walked briskly toward a long, low building.

As they approached, animals whined, growled or bayed, according to their various dispositions. Even Johnny, who was not particularly allergic to dogs, felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. He tried to tell himself that all he had ever heard of St. Bernards was to the effect that they were friendly, gentle dogs. He decided finally that it was their size which made him uneasy.

Binns moved ahead of Sam and unlatched a door at one end of the low building. He entered and the others followed. Johnny saw a long aisle running down the entire length of the building. Off it were the pens containing the dogs. They consisted of waist-high board partitions, with wire netting running from the top of the partitions to the ceiling.

All the pens seemed to contain dogs, some single animals, others as many as a half dozen. There was an open door in the wall side of the pen, through which the dogs could pass out into wire-enclosed runways.

"Here they are, Mr. Cragg," Arthur Binns said cheerfully, "as fine St. Bernards as there are in this country. I can say with pride that these animals have won more blue ribbons than the St. Bernards of any six breeders you could name."

"I couldn't name any," Sam said gloomily. "What I want to know is, what do you feed these dogs?"

"Well, that varies with the season and the purpose. In winter we want a nice, heavy coat of fur and we feed them a little different than otherwise. The basic diet, of course, consists of a mash and a meat and fish mixture."

"Meat *and* fish," said Johnny. "What sort of meat . . . and fish?"

"Oh, a prepared mixture we get from a packing firm over at the village of Deming."

"How much does it cost?" Sam asked.

"Not much, twelve cents a pound."

Sam groaned. "And how much does one of these dogs eat in a day?"

"Approximately three pounds of the meat-fish mixture. And perhaps three pounds of mash."

Sam Cragg recoiled. "So it costs over fifty cents a day per dog?"

"That's right. Rather cheap. If we bought in smaller amounts it would cost a dollar a day or more to feed one of these animals. They're pretty big fellows."

"You're telling me!" exclaimed Sam.

"Sam," said Johnny. "You know what? I don't think much of your inheritance. It's too expensive."

"All right," Sam replied. "Any time you want to go, I'm ready. George can have it."

"Yes, George. By the way, Binns, how long has George been around here?"

"Seven, almost eight years. He was about thirteen when Mr. Cragg brought him home."

"Where'd he pick him up? He didn't just find him, did he?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Cragg didn't say much about it, but George used to complain a lot. His father was a horse owner. He blew . . . I mean he committed suicide when he lost everything he owned."

"So Julius took him in out of pity?"

"If I know my uncle, which I don't," said Sam sagely, "he probably got all the dough from the kid's old man."

"Even so, it was something for him to take the kid in. And keep him. Or wasn't he as fresh with Julius?"

Binns shrugged. "I haven't seen any change in him."

"Then I'll bet Uncle Julius slapped him down plenty. I remember what he used to do to me. . . ."

"Somebody's calling you, Sam," Johnny cut in. "Outside."

Sam cocked his head to one side to listen, just as the door of the dog building was opened at the far end. Young Tompkins stuck in his head.

"Cragg," he called. "Man wants to see you."

"Me? What for?"

"Come on out and see. I think he's got something for you."

Tompkins grinned and let the door slam shut. Sam Cragg sniffed. "Funny, there'd be somebody around to see me here. I only just got here last night."

"Wait a minute, Sam," Johnny cautioned. "I didn't like that grin on George's face. Let's just duck out by the other door and take a look at your visitor before he can see you."

"Huh? What for?"

"I dunno, but let's be on the safe side. Come on . . ."

Johnny trotted down the runway. Reaching the door, he opened it a crack. Then he grunted sheepishly. An eye was peering in at him through the same crack.

"Hello," Johnny said lamely.

The man outside pulled the door open. "You Mr. Cragg, the new owner?"

"Uh-uh, he went out the other way."

"No, I didn't," Sam exclaimed. "Here I am. What can I do for you?"

"You can take care of this bill," said the newcomer. "It's gotten too big to let run any longer."

"What bill?" cried Sam. "I don't owe any money."

"Isn't this your place? Don't you own these dogs?"

"Yeah, but I just inherited them. . . ."

"That's what I heard. It's the only reason I gave credit since Julius Cragg died. So now, if you'll just give me a check. . . ."

Johnny drew a deep breath. "Of course, my good man. Mr. Cragg'll mail you the check, just as soon as he gets things straightened out."

"That'll be now — or there won't be any food delivered today."

"Now, wait a minute, Mister," Johnny said crisply. "That's no way to talk to a customer. We'll take this matter up with your employer."

"I'm him," was the curt reply. "William Quadland's the name. Binns can vouch for that."

"That's right," said Binns. "Mr. Quadland owns the packing company from who we been getting the meat and fish mixture. He's been very good about extending us credit, while we were waiting for Mr. Cragg to show up."

"See?" said Quadland. "Your dogs'd been pretty hungry if it hadn't been for me."

"All right," said Johnny darkly. "I'll pay your little bill." He thrust a hand into his pocket. "How much is it?"

"Eighteen twenty-five. Eighteen hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"Eighteen hundred and twenty-five?" screamed Sam.

"That's right. You've been buying a lot of food, you know. About a ton every three days. . . ."

"Omigod!" said Sam Cragg.

Johnny turned to Binns. "Is that right, Binns? Do we owe a bill as large as that?"

Binns nodded. "Yes, the dogs are pretty heavy eaters . . . and there are quite a few of them."

Johnny cleared his throat. Then he put on his best smile. "Well, Mr. Quadland, that's a little more than I expected. Naturally, I don't have that much money with me — "

"I thought the other fellow was Cragg," Quadland said bluntly.

"He is. But I'm his business manager. As I was saying, Mr. Cragg only just took over. Naturally, there are a few details to straighten out with the executors — "

"Cragg's the executor of the estate," Quadland cut in. "I checked up."

"Did you now? Well, Mr. Cragg has to sign a few papers at the bank and so on and then — "

"The papers are ready for him. My brother, Henry, runs the bank at Deming. That's where Julius Cragg always kept his account."

Johnny looked thoughtfully at William Quadland. "I suppose you know then, how much Mr. Cragg has on deposit at the bank?"

"Uh-huh. Eighty-four dollars."

"Ha-ha," Johnny laughed. "You certainly looked into things, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh, that's why I'm here this morning. I get my money, or else?"

"Or else you don't eh?"

"Or else I start suit for it. And before I do that, I tell my

manager at the plant not to send out another pound of food. Catch on?"

Johnny suddenly decided to change tactics. He drew himself up to his full five feet ten and thrust out his right hand. He rested the fingers lightly on Mr. Quadland's chest. "Now, wait a minute, Mr. Quadland. I don't believe I care for your attitude at all. If you're going to be belligerent. . . ."

"I won't be belligerent. I'll be back in an hour with a summons," Quadland promised.

"Fine," said Johnny, "and in the meantime we'll just shop around elsewhere for our dog meat. I was going to write you out a check for your little bill, but if that's the way you feel about it, I think I'll just let you wait for your money."

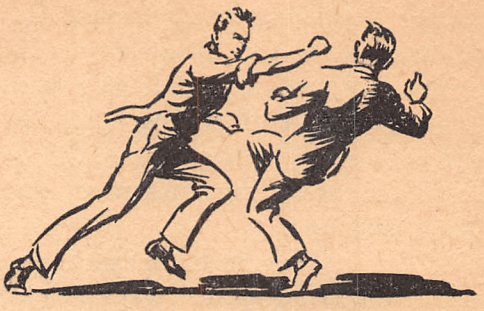
William Quadland's face screwed up suddenly and he gave Johnny a searching glance. "After all, it *is* a big bill," he said somewhat less truculently. "I went away out on the limb giving that much credit."

"And maybe the limb will break off," Johnny said coolly. "We'll see you then — in an hour?"

Quadland scowled and backed out of the dog building. Sam Cragg whispered into Johnny's ear. "He was beginning to weaken."

"Not yet; he's got to think it over. I could see the machinery moving in his head."

CHAPTER SEVEN



ARTHUR BINNS came up behind Johnny. "I'm sorry about that. We — we haven't a hundred pounds of food on the place."

Johnny whirled. "And you haven't fed the dogs today?"

"No, we only give them one big feeding a day. I, er, was expecting Quadland to make a delivery this morning. A hundred pounds won't go very far with the dogs, sir."

"Well, spread it out," Johnny snapped. "If worst comes to worst I'll get a gun and go out and shoot a moose."

"A moose, sir? There aren't any around here. . . . "

"The hell there aren't. They may be pulling milk wagons and somebody might call them horses, but the dogs won't know the difference. . . ."

"Oh no, of course not," said Binns. "The meat in their mixture is horse meat. I read a piece in the *Dog Herald* about it once. They catch these wild horses in Wyoming and — "

"Wyoming?" exclaimed Sam. "This is Missouri!"

"Of course, they freeze the meat and ship it to the packing plants where it is mixed — "

"Save the details for later," Johnny said, "I just had breakfast. Come on, Sam, we've got some thinking to do."

They left the dog pens and started toward the house. As they

approached the kitchen door, a man got up from a hammock slung near by.

"What is this?" Johnny muttered, "old home week. . . ." Then he looked into the man's face and his nostrils flared. He did not recognize the man's face, but he knew the type. He was a slender man of medium height, dark complexion and rather sharp features. The right corner of his mouth drooped a little and his eyes were habitually slitted.

He said, in an almost toneless voice: "I'm Pete Suratt."

Sam Cragg stopped behind Johnny and the latter could feel his friend's heavy breathing on the back of his neck. Johnny said:

"If you're selling dog food we might be willing to give you a trial. . . ."

"Don't be funny," Pete Suratt said. "You're not Cragg, anyway. The big lug is. He looks like his uncle."

"I resent that," Sam said, without much spirit.

"So do I," Suratt said softly. "That's why I'd just as soon not come around again."

"That's all right by us," Johnny said. "We may miss you, but — "

"Cut it! I want thirty-two thousand dollars."

There was something in Suratt's face that gave Johnny the impression that he did not have a sense of humor. Maybe it wasn't Suratt's face at all, but the flat bulge under the left breast of his blue, double-breasted suit.

He said uneasily: "Sam hasn't got thirty-two thousand dollars."

"Or thirty-two thousand cents," Sam growled. "Send us your bill and we'll take care of it when we get around to it."

"Come again," Suratt said curtly, "you know what money I'm talking about. The money your uncle held out on me."

Johnny inhaled softly as he suddenly recalled George Tompkins' reference the evening before to a bet on which old Julius Cragg was supposed to have welshed.

"Look, Suratt," he said, "we don't know what this is all about. Sam hadn't seen his uncle since he was a kid. The first he even heard of him in twenty-five years was two days ago in New York when a lawyer told him his uncle had kicked the bucket."

The slits of Suratt's eyes opened a fraction of an inch. "You boys from Broadway? I thought I recognized the style."

"Me, too," said Johnny. "It's warm in New York, eh?"

The slits narrowed again. "Is it?" Suratt asked thinly. "And so now that we understand each other, when can I expect the thirty-two g's?"

Johnny shook his head. "We only got here last night. All we've found so far is eighty-four dollars in the bank and an unpaid bill for dog meat of eighteen hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"Hold it!" snapped Suratt. "I come from the other side of the Mississippi, too. I knew Soapy from away back."

"Soapy?"

"Cragg. They called him Soapy in the old days."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Johnny. He turned to Sam. "Why didn't you ever tell me your uncle was Soapy Cragg?"

"I didn't know it," Sam replied. "I didn't see him in twenty-five years."

"Yeah, I know; he was before my time, too, but I've heard the old-timers talk about him. He was slicker than the soap he peddled for five bucks a bar, with a twenty-dollar bill wrapped with the soap, if you were lucky, which no one ever was."

"I'll come over some Sunday and look at the family album," said Suratt humorlessly, "after I get my thirty-two thousand."

Johnny frowned in annoyance. "You've got a one-track mind, Suratt. I told you Soapy left Sam eighty-four dollars in cash."

"Nuts. Soapy had the first dollar he ever robbed."

"Before he started raising bloodhounds," Johnny retorted. "Their grub bill's a hundred dollars a day, alone."

Suratt sighed wearily. "Your record's scratching. Put in a new needle. What about Soapy's slot-machine factory? Or don't you know about that?"

"Slot machines?" Sam exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "You mean — sure enough slot machines?"

"I mean Pendleton's outfit, yes. It was Soapy's dough greased the John Laws. . . ."

"The lawyer never said anything about that," exclaimed Sam Cragg.

"Maybe you better remind him, eh?" Suratt shrugged his well-clothed shoulders. "I'll give you a jingle this evening."

Johnny waited until Suratt had gone halfway down the macadam drive, toward the gate, before he muttered to Sam Cragg: "Remind me to stuff the telephone bell before tonight."

Sam grimaced. "If you ask me, that torpedo's hot."

"Sam, you said a mouthful. Which reminds me that it's time to go another round with young George."

Sam rubbed his big hands together. "Swell, I'm nice and sore this morning. Maybe he'll sass me, huh?"

They found Tompkins stretched out on the couch in the living room, smoking a cigarette. There were ashes on the rug beside him.

"Georgie," said Johnny. "Let's talk. Who was the torpedo you let into our yard?"

"That wasn't a torpedo," retorted George. "That was a wagon-load of T.N.T. Did you light the fuse?"

"Damn near. Is he the one Julius welshed on?"

George tilted his half-consumed cigarette so it almost burned his nose. "He's been camping on our doorstep ever since. I told him the heir had the money."

Sam glowered. "You know damn well there's only eighty-four dollars in the bank."

"I know it," chuckled George. "But *he* didn't."

"Come clean," Johnny snapped. "Sam's uncle was a bookie, wasn't he?"

"The cops never proved it on him, but me — I wouldn't be surprised. I'll even admit that he *was* a bookie. A damn good one."

"And what about Pendleton?"

George's head came up from the couch. He twisted it and looked at Johnny, then dropped the head back and laughed shortly. "I was going to save the Pendletons. In fact, I was going to make a little dough on the side, selling tickets to the show."

Johnny waved Sam back. "Not yet, Sam. . . . What show, Georgie boy?"

"*The* show, Mister Fletcher," George Tompkins mocked. "There are four Pendletons. Papa Pendleton and three little Pendletons. The last time they called here the seismograph at the university reported violent earth tremblors in this vicinity."

Johnny's eyes glinted. "Tough guys?"

"The old man'll be out sometime today. You make your own decision."

"Why is he coming out?"

"Because I telephoned him."

"You know," said Johnny, "I think you're on the other side."

"That's where you're wrong, Fletcher. I'm on your side. I'll prove it by giving you the complete lowdown on this setup."

"Do that little thing, Georgie. I'd kinda like to know the exact score."

"Okay, I'll tell you. It's bad. You owe the Deming Packing Company — that's Quadland — eighteen hundred and something. You also owe the Daggett Feed Company something like twelve hundred — "

"What for?" howled Sam Cragg.

"Mash; the dogs eat that besides the meat. Then there are two little grocery bills in Deming, one for a hundred or so and one for a mere sixty or seventy. And you mustn't forget Pete Suratt, who wants thirty-two thousand."

"That's the debit side," Johnny said darkly. "Now, what

about the credits? Suratt mentioned the Pendleton outfit. Damn funny Potts didn't mention that."

"Maybe he didn't think it worth while. Julius put some dough into the business when it was on the rocks. Leastwise, he said he did. The Pendletons denied it. Or maybe they claimed they'd paid it back. The gang of them were out the week before Julius — well, before it happened. They had a big fight."

"How do you know what they were fighting about?"

"I've got ears."

"Grandma had ears, too. All right, Georgie, now what about the Webbs?"

George flicked ashes from his cigarette and took a couple of quick puffs. "They're neighbors. They've got the big place across the road."

"So I hear. But what was Webb sore at Julius about?"

"The dogs. He claimed that a dog farm across the road hurt the value of his property. He had a chance to sell his place and the deal fell through because of the dogs. At least, that was Webb's beef."

"I can sympathize with Webb," Sam Cragg cut in.

"What about Webb . . . and you?" Johnny asked.

George sat up and flipped his cigarette with expert aim into the brick fireplace. "There's nothing between Webb and me. He got a screwy notion that I was stuck on that skinny kid of his. That's a laugh."

"Is it? I heard different."

"Potts?" scowled George. "He's a shyster buttinsky. I bought the girl an ice-cream soda once. Maybe twice."

"Puppy love," said Sam. "She's a lot older than you."

George flushed angrily. "Lay off that kid stuff, Cragg. That goes for you, too, Fletcher, with that Georgie business. I knew my way around when I was fourteen. Julius was a good teacher."

"So I've heard," Johnny commented. "Did you know that he was known as Soapy Cragg in his younger days?"

"I know all about him. He told me a lot of fairy tales — "

He stopped as the telephone rang out in the hall. He started for the door, but Mrs. Binns beat him to the phone. After a moment she stuck her head into the living room. "It's for you, Mr. Fletcher."

When Johnny picked up the receiver, a feminine voice spoke into his ear. "Mr. Fletcher? This is your neighbor across the road."

"Ah! I was just thinking about you."

"How interesting!" Susan Webb said mockingly. "But save that for some other time. I just wanted to warn you — I mean, I wanted to tell you that . . . you ought to tell your friend, Mr. Cragg, not to enter into any financial commitments until . . . until he checks up on everything. I mean, in connection with his inheritance."

"So?" said Johnny softly. "Did you have any particular financial commitments in mind?"

"Yes. But . . ." Her voice hesitated a moment. "I'd rather not say, for certain reasons. I do think, however, that it would be advisable for your friend to get in touch with the Deming Trust Company . . . at his earliest convenience."

"That's all pig Latin to me," Johnny exclaimed. "Can't you give me a better picture?"

"No. I — I can't talk, now. Good-bye, Mr. Fletcher."

"Wait — hold it!" It was too late. Susan Webb had hung up. Johnny scowled at the receiver and slammed it on the hook. Then a yelp from the living room sent him flying toward it.

He was just in time to rescue George Tompkins. Sam had the boy's coat and shirt grasped in one big hand and had already lifted George off his feet.

"Let me go, you big stiff?" George howled.

"Sam!"

Sam lowered George to the floor, but retained his grip. He turned his head. "He pulled that Charlie McCragg stuff again."

"Let him alone, Sam," Johnny snapped. "I got enough things on my mind without having you arrested for manslaughter. As

for you, George, put a bridle on that tongue. You may pick on Sam when I'm not around sometime."

George retreated to the door. "Next time he makes a pass at me, I'll bend a baseball bat over his head."

"Ahhrr!" said Sam.

George ducked out of the room. Johnny said wearily: "I know he gets your goat, Sam. I want to slap his teeth out myself, but he's just a kid. You've got to make allowances for him. After all, your uncle's not leaving him anything was a pretty stiff blow."

"Yeah? Well, what the devil did Uncle Julius leave me that's worth while? Did you figure out the money this estate owes? Hell, it isn't worth that much."

"Well," said Johnny wryly, "I want you to make a guess. How much money do you think I've got — I mean from the dough we had when we left New York?"

"I don't know, Johnny. We were holding pretty heavy. Heavier'n for many months."

"That's right. But remember, you were an heir. We did things up brown. Fancy luggage, private compartment on the train, three-dollar dinners, nice tips . . . and a taxi out here. Sammy, I've got exactly two dollars and fifty-five cents in my pocket. . . ."

"What?" cried Sam in consternation. "You mean we went through five hundred bucks?"

"If we didn't, I lost the money and I haven't got any holes in my pockets. . . . I think the first thing we'll do is to take a little run into Deming and draw that eighty-four bucks out of the bank. Then we'll toss for it — heads we stay, tails we catch a bus back to New York."

"Now, you're talking and I hope it's tails. We'll leave this place to the dogs." Sam sneered bitterly. "A fine inheritance!"

"You should always believe your mother, Sam. If she didn't like your Uncle Julius, you should have listened to her."

"I did, only — well, I forgot. And you were so keen on

dropping everything and rushing out here."

"That was my blind faith in justice; we'd had things tough for so long that when they finally began coming a little easier I crowded our luck a little too hard. Oh well, we'll make a comeback. Which reminds me; did that blessed uncle of yours leave such a thing as an automobile?"

"There's a garage, but the doors are closed. Chances are, all that's in it is a bunch of dogs."

Sam was wrong. The garage contained not only a fairly new Buick car, but also a station wagon. The keys were in both and after debating the matter a moment, Johnny selected the station wagon.

With Sam in the seat beside him, he drove out of the garage, heading down the drive toward the road. Before he reached the gate, a bright yellow Packard limousine drew up and blocked the entrance.

Johnny blasted vigorously with the horn. A man climbed out of the Packard, a sleek-looking, pink-faced man with beautiful snowy-white hair. He wore a neat, checked suit that would have been more appropriate on a man thirty years younger.

He beamed at Johnny and Sam. "Gentlemen, am I right in assuming that one of you is Mr. Samuel Cragg?"

"No," Sam snapped. "Sam Cragg's gone back to New York."

A second man climbed out of the Packard, a man about thirty-eight or forty, whose silhouette would have been a twin of Sam Cragg's. He was six feet tall and weighed around 220. His features seemed to have been chiseled from granite . . . by a drunken WPA sculptor.

"Which one of you birds is Cragg?" the second man asked in a voice that resembled that of Bluto, Popeye's perpetual enemy.

"Oh-oh," said Johnny, sotto voce, "these'll be Pendletons."

He was right. The white-haired man came up to the door of the station wagon on Johnny's side and said, pleasantly: "I'm Andrew Pendleton and this is my oldest son, Andy Junior."

"Pleased t'meetcha," Johnny murmured. "We were expecting you. This is Cragg. My name's Fletcher."

He stopped the motor and climbed out of the station wagon. Andrew Pendleton pumped his hand. On the other side, Sam got out and glowered at Andy Junior, who was returning the glower with interest. The big fellows did not shake hands.

"I understand you act as a sort of business manager for Mr. Cragg," Pendleton Senior said. "I learned of your arrival here and thought I'd just run out and have a chat with you — to avoid any possible misunderstandings and to dispel any, ah, rumors you might have heard."

"About Sam owning your business?" Johnny asked sharply. "That isn't a rumor, it's fact. We're open for offers. We'll buy or sell."

"Ha-ha," laughed Pendleton. "You have a sense of humor, I see."

"Get to the point, Pop," Junior said from the other side of the car. "Tell 'em what's what."

"Ah, quite so, Andy. Gentlemen, the situation is simply this. My old friend, Julius Cragg, did help me out with a small loan. But the loan was repaid — with interest when I placed our sensational Whizbango pinball game on the market."

"The Whizbango!" cried Sam Cragg. He came swiftly around the rear of the car, followed by Andy Pendleton. "You mean you made that lousy marble game? I spent fifty-six bucks on one of those machines in one day, without hitting the jack pot. I always said if I ever met the guy who made that game, I'd — "

"You're looking at him," cut in Andy Pendleton. "You'd do what?"

Sam's eyes began to glow and Johnny, in alarm, caught his friend's arm.

"Sam," he said sharply.

Sam shook off his hand. "All right, Pendleton, you're asking for it."

"And I can dish it out," snarled Andy Pendleton.

"Boys, boys," Andrew Pendleton Senior pleaded. "Don't fight, there's no reason. I — I abhor violence." His pink, cherubic face showed concern. "Well . . . take him, Andy."

Andy lunged at Sam Cragg. Fists smacked on flesh and then Andy Pendleton hurtled backwards and struck his father so violently that the old man was upset.

"Come on, palooka," Sam challenged young Pendleton. "Get up and fight!"

Andy Pendleton was sitting on the macadam, bracing himself with his hands. His eyes were dazed and there was a cut on his chin. He tried to get up and couldn't quite make it. His father climbed wobbily to his knees and stared at his son with an expression of awe.

"Andy!" he said unbelievingly.

"And that goes for you, too, you old hypocrite."

Johnny advanced toward Andrew Pendleton, who retreated in alarm.

"You wouldn't hit an old man," the old scoundrel pleaded. "I'm sixty-four years old. . . ."

"Sixty-four? Get into that car or I'll pretend you're only sixty-three and bust that white wig of yours."

Pendleton scrambled for the Packard as his son finally climbed to his feet. The big fellow shook his head and moved uncertainly — and unwillingly — toward Sam Cragg. His father gave him reprieve.

"Andy — no more!"

Junior turned and staggered toward the car. As he climbed in, the old man stuck out his hand. "You win this time, boys. But I've got two more sons. We'll be back."

He stepped on the starter and shifted into second. As the yellow car whipped away, Andy Pendleton recovered sufficiently to yell, "And I'm the smallest one in the family!"

The car was gone then.

"This," said Sam Cragg, "is more like it. That was a nice little workout. Very nice, indeed!"

Johnny Fletcher pursed up his lips. "I must be getting soft, Sam. Five minutes ago I thought of running out on this, with the murderer of your uncle laughing up his sleeve."

Sam's eyes glinted. "Poor Uncle Julius!"

Johnny chuckled. "Get into the car. We haven't got a chance in the world to win this game, so — we'll give it a whirl."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE town of Deming consisted of two blocks of store buildings, split by a through highway. There were four or five blocks of residences behind each business block.

The Deming Trust Company was on a corner. Directly opposite was the First National Bank of Deming. Both were two-story brick buildings, with the bank occupying the first floor and offices the second.

Johnny parked the station-wagon a half block from the building of the Deming Trust Company. He and Sam climbed out and walked toward the bank. Just as they were about to enter, Susan Webb came out. She was accompanied by a stocky, well-built man in tweeds. He was about forty-five.

She seemed to wince as she recognized Johnny and Sam. From the way she started to nod, Johnny got the impression that she intended to pass them by. He maneuvered into her path and exclaimed:

"Why, good morning, Miss Webb."

The girl crimsoned. "Good morning, Mr. Fletcher. And Mr. Cragg. Father . . . Mr. Fletcher . . . Mr. Cragg."

James Webb's head whipped up. "Cragg, eh?" He sniffed as his eyes photographed Sam. "You look just like your uncle, the sanctimonious old hypocrite. . . ."

"Father!"

"Well, he was," James Webb said stoutly. "Everybody knows what I thought of Julius Cragg."

"Tsk! Tsk!" said Johnny. "Rest his soul."

Webb snorted. "Not Cragg. He isn't playing any harp now. And, as for you, young man, go right in and see Quadland. He's looking for you. Come, Susan!"

He brushed past Johnny. As Susan went by she caught Johnny's eyes and shook her head.

Johnny began grinning, but Sam Cragg muttered. "Who does that bird think he is, running down my uncle like that?"

"He's the father of one swell-looking girl."

"You're not getting soft about her, Johnny?" Sam asked, alarm in his tone.

"You can't tell, Sam. Her old man's pretty well heeled and I'm getting to the age where I'd just as soon marry a rich girl as a poor one — especially if the rich girl's as good-looking as Susan Webb."

Sam's forehead creased, but he refrained from further comment as they were entering the bank.

Johnny looked quickly about the interior of the money factory. There were three teller's cages down one side, with a vault in the rear. Near the front was a low-railinged enclosure, in which a pleasant-faced man sat behind a desk, reading the *Financial News*. Behind his desk was a door marked Private.

Johnny swung open the gate of the enclosure and advanced upon the door. The pleasant-faced man put down his newspaper.

"Yes sir, anything I can do for you?"

"I've got some business with Henry," Johnny replied and pushed open the door of the private office. Sam Cragg followed close at his heels.

Henry Quadland was almost a twin of his brother, the dog-meat man, except that he looked even meaner. He was engaged in the very unfinancial task of trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle.

The guilty expression on his face as he jerked up his head quickly changed to one of anger. "What do you mean, breaking

into my office like this?" he demanded.

"Why, I understood you wanted to see us," Johnny retorted. "This is Mr. Cragg. My name's Fletcher."

A wolfish grin spread over the banker's face. "Ah, Mr. Cragg, yes. I was just about to write you a letter. To tell you that the bank is being compelled to exercise the deed of trust on your — dog farm."

"What's a deed of trust?" Sam asked innocently.

"A little business invented by bankers," Johnny explained grimly. "On a straight mortgage it takes them a long time to foreclose and the mortgagee always has a chance of buying back his property, within a certain length of time. With a deed of trust they can sell you out on a moment's notice. . . ."

"Thirty days," said Henry Quadland.

"Provided we don't pay the amount of the deed when it is presented."

"Eh?"

"How much does it amount to with interest?"

Quadland shrugged. "I'd have to look it up. Of course we'll probably lose money on the transaction."

"Why?"

"Because the farm won't bring fifteen thousand at a forced sale."

"Is that so? Hm, maybe we'd better wait then and buy it in at the sale."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, we were just going to pay off the deed — at face value. However if you're going to foreclose and sell the farm at auction. . . ."

Quadland blinked and then a flush started at the base of his throat and worked upward. "You mean you have . . . the money to repay the loan on the deed?"

"Did anyone say we didn't?"

Quadland cleared his throat. "Why, my brother. . . ."

"Your brother jumped to conclusions, just like you did. He

insulted us so I told him to go whistle up a tree for his money. As for you, Mr. Quadland, you can go and get yourself a whistle — a *big* whistle. Come, Sam, we'll take our business elsewhere."

Henry Quadland's mouth was wide open when Johnny turned and slammed out of the office. But when they reached the sidewalk, Sam whispered in an agonized tone:

"Jeez, Johnny, you didn't have to get him sore like that, did you? He'll put the screws on us, now."

"He'd already put them on, so the only thing I could do was make a big exit . . . in the hope that it'll get around."

"What do you mean, get around?"

"I don't know. It couldn't hurt — and it might do some good. Have you ever noticed, Sam, that if a town's big enough to have a Rotary Club it's always got a rival club, too — a Kiwanis, or Lions. The soreheads who can't get into the first club always start a new one. . . . It's the same with banks. If there's one bank in a town, there's always a second . . . to take care of the soreheads. . . . Maybe I can do some business with the sorehead bank in this burg."

"You'll have to do it pretty darn quick, then, Johnny, because those dogs'll be hungry by the time we get back. . . ."

Johnny groaned. "I almost forgot that herd of elephants. I guess we better run back to the place and find out from Binns which grocers we already owe money. . . . I don't want to blunder into the wrong store and ask for a half ton of hamburger."

They returned to the station wagon and Johnny drove gloomily back to the dog farm. As they entered the yard, Sam exclaimed:

"Pipe the jalopy, Johnny. With New York plates."

It was a king of jalopies, a Cadillac just a little short of fifty feet in length and enough nickel chromium to open a store. A colored chauffeur, in a tailored olive-green uniform, sat behind the wheel, reading a copy of *True Love Tales.*

As Johnny stopped the station wagon and climbed out, the door of the kennel building opened and Binns came out with a

man who was undoubtedly the owner of the gasoline locomotive.

He signaled to Sam. "Mr. Cragg, this is Mr. Faraday . . . from New York. He's come to look at the dogs."

Johnny took a deep breath and stepped ahead of Sam. "Mr. Faraday, this is *indeed* a pleasure."

Mr. Faraday wore baggy tweed trousers and a coat with huge leather buttons. Johnny would have disdained to wear his shapeless hat, even in his poorest days.

He ignored Johnny's outstretched hand. "I want Mohawk the Seventh," he snapped. "And I'll pay two hundred and twenty-five dollars. Not a penny more."

A bright light leaped into Johnny's eyes. "Two and a quarter for Mohawk the Seventh? Oh, come, Mr. Faraday, you're joking! Mohawk's worth five times that amount and you know it —"

"I don't know it!" howled Faraday. "I only know that every one of you chaps act the same. The minute you hear Martin Faraday's interested in a dog you triple the price. It's not the money, sir, it's the principle of the thing. I *will not* be gypped. I know perfectly well that you'd sell that dog to anyone else for two hundred and twenty-five and that's all I'm going to pay for him."

"Mr. Faraday," said Johnny, drawing a deep breath. "I'm going to amaze you. I'm not going to charge you two hundred and twenty-five dollars for that beautiful dog on which you've got your heart set. In fact, I'm not going to charge you anything for him. I'm going to make you a present of him. He's yours, free, gratis, with the compliments of Mr. Cragg and myself."

Martin Faraday stared at Johnny in astonishment. "What was that, young man?"

"Mohawk the Seventh's yours, Mister Faraday. That's all there's to it."

"It isn't, there's a catch to it. I know there is."

Johnny gave Mr. Faraday a reproachful look. Then he sighed, "Binns, get Mohawk for Mr. Faraday. Go ahead, I mean it."

Sam Cragg stepped up beside Johnny, "Don't, Johnny," he whispered hoarsely. "We need the dough."

Martin Faraday looked darkly at Johnny. "You can't do that, young man. I'll give you three hundred for the dog."

"No," Johnny said sadly. "I said I was making you a present of Mohawk and I mean it. You can't pay a cent for him."

"Five hundred," snapped Faraday. "But that's all."

Johnny shook his head. "If you won't take him as a present, you can't have him. That's final."

Faraday swore angrily. "You can't do that. You know I want that dog, but you can't *give* him to me. I apologize for the way I lit into you a few minutes ago. Forget it."

"I *have* forgotten it, Mr. Faraday. But look — we've got two hundred dogs. We can give one away, without missing him . . . too much. But I'll tell you what, Mr. Faraday, if you feel under any obligation, why there's something you can do in return. Just a small thing. . . ."

A gleam of suspicion came into Faraday's eyes. "What?"

Johnny turned and looked at the road yacht. He allowed a dreamy look to come into his eyes. "Why, sir, I've always wanted to ride in a car like that. I guess . . . well, this sounds kind of silly, but I guess we all have our little whimsies. As a matter of fact, I'd like to have one or two friends *see* me riding in that car. Over at our town, Deming."

Faraday cocked his head to one side. "Are you serious?"

"I really am, Mr. Faraday." Johnny put all the wistfulness in his tone that he could summon.

Faraday snorted. "Well, get in, then, man. Get in and I'll drive you wherever you want to go. I'll even park the car in front of your friends' homes and blow the horn so they'll be sure to see you."

"That," said Johnny, "is the idea. Only — er, could you do it so these people — my friends — will sort of get the idea that the car is mine? I mean, they'll know different afterwards, but until they find out, they'll buzz about it."

Mr. Faraday smiled fondly. "I'll do that little thing. Any way you like. . . ."

"Will you? Then, would you mind staying right here for a half hour or so and just let your chauffeur drive me and my pal over to Deming and sort of blow the horn whenever we ask him to?"

Martin Faraday bestowed upon Johnny the sort of look he would have given a six-year-old child who handed him a bouquet of dandelions.

"Why, certainly, I'll stay here and romp with the dogs. . . . Archibald! You're under Mr. Cragg's orders. Take him wherever he wants to go — and do whatever he wants you to. Understand?"

The chauffeur showed a mouthful of gold inlays. "Yas, Mr. Faraday, Ah understands."

Just then Binns came out of the kennels leading a tremendous St. Bernard. Martin Faraday began to pat the animal and Johnny seized the moment to whisper to sam: "Run up to our room and look in the pigskin bag. There's a checkbook in it — on the Wheat Exchange Bank in New York. Bring it down. . . ."

"Johnny," Sam exclaimed in concern, "have you gone crazy? You haven't got any money in that bank — you drew it out before we left town. . . ."

"I know, but there are still some checks left. I want them — and while you're about it, bring down that horse-blanket sport coat I bought last year in a weak moment. Don't ask questions, I know what I'm doing."

Sam's expression told very plainly that he did not believe Johnny, but he trotted off toward the house. While he was gone, George Tompkins came up from the fields, with Oscar, the yard St. Bernard, lumbering along behind him.

"Some boat," George said, regarding the car. His mouth twisted and Johnny stepped forward quickly. "Get into the house, George," he whispered savagely, "this is big business and I'm not going to have you queer it. I mean it. . . ."

A wisecrack died on George's lips. He shrugged and strolled away again. Johnny looked at Oscar and frowned.

"Hello, Oscar, old boy," he said experimentally.

Oscar looked at him through half-closed lids, but his huge tail wagged a little. Johnny moved forward cautiously and patted the big head, poised meanwhile on the balls of his feet, ready for instant traveling, if Oscar repelled his advances.

The St. Bernard submitted and Johnny drew a deep breath. "Binns," he said loudly, "go and get me that dog from the second kennel. And bring me a couple of leashes."

He smiled at Faraday, who was playing with Mohawk the Seventh. "You don't mind if I take a dog or two in the car, do you?"

"No, of course not. Say, Mohawk is certainly a fine fellow, isn't he?"

"He sure is," replied Johnny. "Just about the best St. Bernard I've ever seen." Which was a downright lie. Johnny could not tell one dog from another. As far as he was concerned Oscar, the yard dog, was an identical twin of Mohawk.

Binns returned with a dog and a couple of leashes. He fastened them to the collars of Oscar and the other dog and handed the leashes to Johnny. Just them Sam returned from the house, carrying a checked tweed coat that would have caught the eye of any Pinkerton man at a race track.

Sam's nostril's twitched nervously as he stopped beyond leash distance of Johnny's dogs. "What's the idea, Johnny?" he asked in a low voice.

"Why, we're going to take these boys for a ride, Sammy. They need a little change of scenery, you know."

"Well," said Sam, "I'll see you when you get back."

"Get in the car, Sam," Johnny snapped.

Sam's face turned gray. He hesitated for a moment, then with the air of a man stepping into the execution chamber, climbed into the Cadillac. Johnny paused only to speak to Mr. Faraday.

"We'll be back in a half hour or so, Mr. Faraday. It's certainly fine of you to indulge a whim of mine. . . ."

"Not at all, sir. Take an hour if you like."

The St. Bernards climbed into the car and began piling up on top of Sam Cragg, who was too scared to ward them off. Johnny stepped in and closed the door.

"Down on the floor, mutts," he said.

One of the dogs, misunderstanding his order for an invitation, got off Sam and climbed up on Johnny. Johnny wrestled with the dog, not knowing if it was Oscar, the pet, or the kennel dog and not daring to be firm with him.

As the Cadillac rolled out of the drive on to the road, the dog's tongue was licking Johnny's face.

"Where to, Boss?" Archibald, the chauffeur, asked.

"That bump in the road they call Deming, about three miles east — that's toward St. Louis. By the way, Archie, have you got a fountain pen?"

"Yas, sir, here it is."

Desperately Johnny dumped the St. Bernard to the floor. Surprisingly, it remained there. When Johnny returned the fountain pen to the chauffeur a moment later, he rescued Sam from the affection of the second St. Bernard.

Perspiration was pouring down Sam's face. "Johnny," he gasped in a whisper, "what's the matter with you? Do you . . . feel all right?"

"I haven't lost my mind, if that's what you mean."

"But this, Johnny! And refusing the five hundred for that pooch, when we need money so badly."

"We need a lot more than five hundred. I got an idea back there and I decided to gamble — win everything, or lose everything. Give me that coat."

He shucked the coat he was wearing and then crumpled the Joseph's coat into a ball. He tossed it on the floor of the car, stamped on it with a foot, then shook it out and slipped it on.

After which he took off his brown felt hat and put it through a similar process.

Sam cried out in anguish. "Johnny!"

Johnny smoothed out the hat as well as he was able, after the manhandling. He clapped it rakishly on his head and gave it a final buffeting.

"How do I look now, Sammy?"

A little gleam of understanding came into Sam's eyes. "Cripes, you're trying to look like Faraday. . ."

"Go to the head of the class, Sam. Only a rich man — a very rich man — can dress this sloppy. Wait a minute, I've got a crease in these trousers. . . ."

He remedied that, then leaned back against the luxurious upholstery and expanded. "The dogs are part of the act, Sam. Without them, and the car, I might be mistaken for a bum. But this way — it's a cinch."

"I wonder," said Sam, "what the jail in this town's like?"

"Probably crummy, but don't worry. Here's the burg. Archie . . . drive over to the bank, there, the First National."

Johnny peered out of the car window as Archie stopped the car. "About six feet more, Archie. That's fine, now tootle that horn a couple of times."

The horn tooted: "A-beep-a-beep!"

"Swell," said Johnny. "Now, look, Archie; Mr. Faraday told you to do everything I ordered, didn't he?"

"Tha's right, Boss."

"Good. Then, here's what you do. Give that horn a blast every sixty seconds. After the third beep-a-beep — three minutes — you come dashing into the bank. Act excited and insist on seeing Mr. Fletcher, right away. When you see me . . . no matter what I'm doing at the moment, bust right out and yell . . . let's see. . . . Yes, yell: 'Mr. Fletcher, I've just seen Mrs. Van Piltzer driving by. You want I should chase after and catch her Rolls?' . . . You've got that, Archie?"

"Yas, sir. Ah beeps the horn every minute, then after the

third beep Ah busts into the bank and yells, 'Mistuh Fletcher, Mrs. Van Piltzer's Rolls done just drove by, y'all want me to run after and catch it?' "

Johnny grinned. "That's right. You might put in, there, Mrs. Van Piltzer of Newport. Here I go, Sam, I'd better pull this one alone. You're not dressed properly."

Sam sighed in relief. "That suits me fine."

Johnny climbed out of the car and then grasping a leash in each hand, persuaded the St. Bernards to follow. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked toward the bank windows and saw a bald-headed, fat man staring out.

He said: "Give the horn a beep, now, Archie."

The big Cadillac had already attracted the attention of a number of local citizens and as Johnny strolled toward the entrance of the bank, a small traffic jam resulted.

In the bank, Johnny permitted one of the dogs to upset a waste basket beside a writing stand. He exclaimed loudly, in the general direction of the tellers, "I say there, I'd like to see the president of this bank."

CHAPTER NINE

THE nearest teller slammed up his wicket and stuck his head part way through the opening.

"Right over there, sir, in the private office."

Johnny rumbled a thanks, then headed the St. Bernards toward the private office. One of them crashed into a typewriter stand and only the alertness of the stenographer saved it from falling to the floor.

"Look where you're going, you stupid oxen," Johnny roared.

He twisted the knob of the bank president's office door and then let go of the leash of the right-hand dog. It charged into the room ahead of Johnny. The other dog almost jerked Johnny off his feet as it followed its mate.

"Hello," Johnny cried. "Look out there! . . ."

The freed St. Bernard rose on his back feet, to tremendous height, then let his front paws fall on the bank president's desk. The nails weren't quite sharp enough to secure an anchorage and slipped on the mahognay desk top. A dozen letters followed the dog to the floor.

Johnny leaped forward and recaptured the leash of the dog, then straightening, looked into a twitching red face that was above a roly-poly body.

"Ha!" said Johnny. "You run this bank, do you? Fletcher's my name. From N'York. Just got here last night to sort of help

out a friend of mine. He inherited a little property hereabouts and a bunch of your local sharpers are tryin' t'do him out of it. I figure to knock their ears down for 'em. That stupid oaf across the street who runs a mousebox he calls a bank is one of them. But I s'pose y'know all about him, ha?"

"Henry Quadland? I sure do, Mister . . . Fletcher. By the way, my name's Kunkel, August Kunkel."

"H'arya, Kunkel. Like I was saying, this corn-fed loan shark's in with one of your small-time businessmen, fella name of Webb or Webster, or something like that. They thought to run a shindy on this friend of mine. The fools. . . I'll teach them a lesson. Here . . . hold these leashes a moment!"

He thrust the ends of the leashes into August Kunkel's hands, before the banker could retreat. Then he whipped a checkbook out of his pocket and slapped it down on Mr. Kunkel's desk. He swooped up the pen from the banker's ornate desk set, scowled at the point, then flicked ink behind his back . . . on Mr. Kunkel's nice, wine-colored rug.

He filled in the date on the checkbook, then looked up. "Y'know what these local yokels tried to pull on my friend, Cragg? They thought he was stony and they faked up a few phony bills for dog meat, a couple thousand altogether — the pikers — then they come busting out to Cragg's place with a bunch of summonses and stuff, figuring if he couldn't pay they'd take away his place on him. They didn't even have brains enough to think up a good one. The house is only a small one, ten or twelve rooms, and the land's nothing at all. It's the dogs they're after — finest St. Bernards this side of the Alleghanies. . . . I'll fix them, the farmers. Here's a little something I'm going to deposit here, for my friend to draw against, in case I can't stay with him long enough to see him through. Umm, five might not be enough. I'd better make it ten . . . thousand. . . ."

He stooped and began writing again.

"A-beep-a-beep," blew the horn of the Cadillac right outside Mr. Kunkel's window.

Johnny wrote, "Ten thousand dollars and no cents," and then scowled at the pen again. He flicked ink over Mr. Kunkel's rug once more, then stooped to affix his signature to the check. He wrote Jonathan L. . . .

And then the door of the office burst open and Archibald, the colored chauffeur, exclaimed, " 'Xcuse me, Mistuh Fletcher, but I just done seen Mrs. Van Piltzer of Newport driving by in her Rolls. I thought y'all would want to know and if I should chase after —"

"Old Mrs. Van Piltzer?" cried Johnny. "*Here* in Missouri? You must be mistaken, Archibald."

"Nossuh, suh, it was her all right. I rec'lect her license num'er. . . ."

"Of course!" roared Johnny. "Of course! She told me she was going to drive through to the coast. I'd forgotten — here, Archie — bring the dogs, we'll catch her —" He leaped for the door, then as he was about to hurtle through, skidded to a stop.

"Oh, Mr. Bungel!" he said. "Hold everything! I'll be back in ten minutes. . . ."

Then he went out. He bounced through the bank, rushed to the Cadillac and jumped in. It wasn't until Archie came up and began piling in the dogs, that Johnny realized Sam Cragg was not in the car.

"Damn," he swore. "Where's Cragg?"

"The gen'man who was with you ? Dunno, he said he had a little bus'ness t'take care of. . . ."

"He would!" snarled Johnny. "Well, climb in and drive like hell. . . ."

Archibald leaped into the car and started the motor. "Which way, Mistuh Fletcher?"

"Any way — after Mrs. Van Piltzer, or Pillzer. . . . Get going. . . ."

The Cadillac leaped away so suddenly Johnny was slammed back against the seat cushions. They were going fifty-five in second, when Johnny cried:

"All right, we're out of sight of the bank. Slow down. . . ."

"Yas suh, Boss!" Then, "Did we'all rob that there bank?"

"What?" Johnny chuckled. "Oh, you mean the act. No, it was just a game."

"What 'bout the other gen'man? We goin' wait for him?"

"No. He'll find his way back to the farm. Serve him right if he has to walk. He had no business leaving the car. Home . . . Archie!"

Johnny Fletcher heard the dogs a half mile away. He looked at his dollar watch and saw that it was almost noon. Since they hadn't eaten that day, the dogs were pretty hungry.

In the yard Martin Faraday was surrounded by a half dozen St. Bernards, including Mohawk the Seventh. He greeted Johnny vociferously.

"Ha! Make them jealous, did you?"

Johnny grinned. "It worked swell. Fella who high-hatted me once came across the street to say hello. Thanks a lot, Mr. Faraday. Say, those dogs seem to go for you? Maybe you ought to take one or two along to keep Iroquois — I mean, Mohawk, company."

"Wish I could. Can't handle more'n one. Must be goin' now. Long way to drive. Come, Mohawk!"

Johnny waited only until Faraday had climbed into his car, before he started running for the house.

George Tompkins was sprawled on the couch in the living room. "What's going on around here, Fletcher?" he asked.

"Big things, Georgie. You wouldn't understand. . . . Where's the local telephone directory?"

"By the telephone. Where would you expect to find it — in the dog house?"

Johnny gave George a dirty look and headed for the telephone in the foyer. He found the thin directory and looked up the number of the First National Bank of Deming. He called it and asked for Kunkel, the president. When he got him he cried:

"Dunkel? Johnathan Fletcher talking. Dammit, did I forget

my checkbook in your place? Yes? Well, hold it. I'll have one of the men pick it up. Look, I'm tied up with Mrs. Van Piltzer. The old girl's going to stop over an hour or so. . . What? I didn't sign the check? Damme, too many things on m'mind. All right, I'll have one of the men bring it back. I'm going to stick around a day or two and get Cragg straightened out with his bloomin' dogs. May see you again. If not — cheerio!"

He slammed the receiver on the hook, then picked up the directory again and turned to the yellow classified section. He found "Grocers," and saw four were listed. He called the first, roaring into the phone:

"Is this the grocery store? Cragg Dog Farm. I want you to rush out five hundred pounds of your best hamburger right away. Dammit, I said five *hundred*, not five pounds. And throw in a few hundred pounds of bones, too . . . What? . . . Did I ask you for credit? Call up the First National Bank. They'll tell you the money's there. And rush that meat right out here or you'll get no more business from us. Understand? 'Bye!"

He hung up and repeated the conversation with the second grocer, then the third and fourth.

When he finally finished he took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his perspiring forehead.

"Fletcher," said George Tompkins, who had come out to the foyer, "if that works, I'll buy you a pair of copper-lined earmuffs."

"Speaking of work," Johnny said grimly, "we're going to have a new deal around here — a no-work, no-eat deal. Catch on, Georgie?"

Georgie regarded him uneasily. "I've been working. Taking care of the business end of things. . . ."

"I'm running that end from now on. You're transferred to the Maintenance Division. In other words, you get out and help Binns clean the pens, or whatever he does, and you start right now."

George sneered but when Johnny moved toward him he turned and scampered out of the house.

Mrs. Binns came out of the kitchen: "What are we going to eat, Mr. Fletcher? There isn't a bite of food in the pantry."

"Call up the grocery, Mrs. Binns. Any grocery in Deming. Order what you need and have them bring it right out."

"Will they do it?"

"They will. I've opened charge accounts with all the grocers. Everything's fine, Mrs. Binns."

He chuckled and strolled out of the house. He stood for a moment on the front veranda surveying the impressive English-style house of James Webb. It was a nice place; a lot of money had been put into the house and landscaping of the grounds.

But why should Webb be so vindictive toward his neighbors? His house was more than a hundred yards from the kennels across the road and about the only times the dogs could be heard were on those rare occasions when they all joined in concerted chorus.

He turned away to go around the house and inform Binns of the impending arrival of the dog food, when he saw a strange sight approaching from the direction of Deming.

It was nothing more than a farm truck, with high sideboards. The sideboards could not conceal the most decrepit nag Johnny had ever seen in his life.

Sam Cragg was in the seat beside the driver of the truck.

Johnny went to meet the truck. Sam saw him and swung to the ground.

"Look what I got, Johnny," he cried jubilantly.

"What is it?"

"Huh?" Sam looked disconcerted. "It's a horse. I bought it."

"Omigod!" Johnny groaned.

Sam beamed. "I saw it in Deming. A man had it hitched to a wagon that it couldn't hardly pull. I thought, gee whiz, that's exactly what we need. We been paying twelve cents a pound

for horse meat and this — this weighs fourteen hundred pounds and I got it for only twenty-two dollars!"

"Take it away," Johnny choked. "Take it away before I pick it up and hit you in the face with it."

"Johnny," exclaimed Sam. "What's the matter with you? We need it. Have you forgotten . . ."

"Yes, I've forgotten. More than you'll ever know, Sam. For punishment I ought to let you keep that fugitive from a glue factory. I ought to make you grind him up into hamburger. But I'll take pity on you — I'll just let you take it back."

Sam gave Johnny a reproachful look, then turned to the driver of the truck. "Sorry, pal, but you see how it is. Take the nag back to that farmer I got him from. Tell him it's no sale."

"All right," said the driver. "I'll take the horse back. But you owe me three dollars for driving him here."

"I'll send you a check," Johnny said curtly.

"I don't want a check. I want my three bucks . . . and I want it now."

"How do you want it?" Sam asked savagely. "In the face, with my fists? Or would you rather wait for Johnny to send you a check?"

The truck driver looked at Sam's massive body, then muttered and started turning his truck. As it pulled away, Sam said sullenly to Johnny:

"I think you made a mistake, Johnny. Listen to those dogs. They're hungry — "

"Their food's on the way from town. I bought enough to last them two or three days."

"Huh? With what?"

"Credit. Why do you suppose I went to the bank?"

"I don't know. I — I thought — "

"You thought I'd gone crazy. Yeah, I saw how you acted. Hell, haven't you been with me long enough to know that I never fail, when we're really up against it? I gave that hick banker

such a razzle-dazzle that he never got in his life. He thinks I'm a multi-millionaire at least."

"But, Johnny, you didn't give him a rubber check? It'll catch up with you."

"Don't worry, Sammy boy. I'd never do anything that was illegal . . . if there's any chance of being caught. No, I didn't give him a rubber check. I started to write him out a check, but never got to finish it, although I admit for a second or two, it was damn close. Archibald took his time about interrupting me."

"I don't get it."

"Neither did Kunkel, the banker. I was going to give him a check for ten g's, for you to draw against. Only I never finished writing out the check."

"Then it's no good. I don't see what you gained by all the monkey shines."

"I gained the banker's confidence. You see, I had to rush out of the bank. In my hurry I forgot my checkbook . . . on Kunkel's desk. Do you think he had enough curiosity to look at the stubs?"

"Yeah, I get that. But you didn't have anything in the bank. You drew out the five hundred odd we had, before you left New York. . . ."

"That's right, but if you'll remember, I borrowed Archie's fountain pen in the car. All I did, was write a 32 in front of the five hundred that was on the last stub."

Sam stared at Johnny in bewilderment. "But if you didn't get any money, what good does it do to make the banker think you've got thirty-two thousand five hundred dollars in a New York bank?"

"Why," said Johnny, "I don't know. Not for sure. But Kunkel *thinks* I've got money. He *thinks* I'm going to sign that ten-thousand-dollar check. In the meantime, if anyone should happen to ask him about me, why, naturally, he's going to tell him what he *thinks*, that I'm a big multimillionaire from New York. He saw my car — what he thinks is my car — he saw my chauffeur, my sloppy clothes and big dogs . . . and he listened

to my bull; is he going to tell a grocer who calls up and asks if I'm good for a lousy fifty dollars' worth of hamburger that my credit's no good? . . ."

"Lord!" breathed Sam.

"You said it. And if I'm not mistaken, there's a truck coming down the road there with the first load of hamburger. You might go and tell Mrs. Binns to get a shovelful of it for our lunch. If it's good enough for the dogs, it's good enough for us."

It *was* a grocer's truck, and it contained five hundred pounds of hamburger packed in wooden tubs. Before it had unloaded, a second truck arrived.

"That's fine," Johnny said to Sam. "The driver of the first will tell his boss that we're also buying meat from their competitor. That'll put them in competition to get our business exclusively."

Binns came out of the kennels with tears in his eyes. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Fletcher," he said. "The dogs were so hungry. . . ."

"S'all right, Binns. Let them have their fill. There's a ton of the stuff and enough bones to fill a graveyard. I don't believe in stinting growing animals on their food." As an afterthought: "Although if these dogs grow any bigger I'll sell them to a circus for Australian elephants."

When the third truck came, Johnny saw Susan Webb, in tan slacks and bright-red sweater and armed with a pair of pruning shears, working at a row of flowers that bordered the front of the Webb estate.

He strolled to the wire fence and leaning against the top of it, called across the road: "Hi, neighbor!"

She looked up, then stooped over a rose bush. "How'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know what I mean. Father thought he had you frozen out."

"Best thing to melt ice is hot air," said Johnny, chuckling.

"And tell your father, I don't like him. I don't mind his fighting me, but those dogs have to eat, no matter what happens."

"I know. I thought it was horrid of him to stop your getting supplies. But he seemed to think it was the best way to stop you."

"From what? From breathing the same Missouri air that he's using? I haven't done him any harm."

She straightened for a moment. "Surely, you're not still pretending not to know what it's all about?"

Johnny scowled. "He wants to be rid of the dogs over here."

She stooped over a bush again and Johnny saw her shaking her head.

"Well, what is it, then?"

"Ask your friend, Sam Cragg."

"Cut it out," Johnny growled. "Sam's the best friend I've got in the world. But if he knows more than I do, about *anything*, he's been fooling me for fifteen years. Come on, spill it — what's it all about?"

"Be at the Calico Cat tonight at ten," she said, then straightened and walked swiftly toward her house. Johnny, staring after her, saw a flash of white flannels in a front window and after pretending to examine the wire fence a moment, sauntered back toward the house.

When he got inside, Georgie Tompkins was again parked on the couch. A cigarette dangled from his slack lips and he was breathing heavily.

Johnny moved swiftly across the thick rug and reaching down, dumped George to the floor. The boy bleated and began swearing at Johnny.

"What'd I tell you about working?" Johnny snarled.

"I came in for lunch," George howled. "Or don't I get time off to eat around here?"

"Has either Binns or Sam come in?" Johnny retorted.

"No, but *you* have. You talk about everybody else working around here, but when do *you* start?"

"I'm working now," Johnny said coolly. "I'm the boss around here and I do the executive work."

"You're the boss, like hell! Cragg inherited this dump. If he's fool enough to let you take it away from him, all right, but I don't have to stick around here. I'm getting out of here."

"When?"

George's nostrils flared, but he swallowed hard. "As soon as I get some dough. You know I haven't got a dime and you're taking advantage of that."

Johnny reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. He tossed it on the floor, at Georgie's feet. "There's a quarter. I've had less than that a lot of times."

Georgie started to stoop for the quarter, then straightened without it and walked out of the room. Johnny picked up the piece of silver and dropped it into his pocket.

The front doorbell rang. He went to answer it and when he opened the door, a man thrust a piece of folded paper at him.

"A little present for you, Mister."

Johnny looked at it, saw the word "Summons," and ripping the piece of paper in half threw the sections in the man's face.

"I'm not Cragg. Go back and get another summons and serve it on the right person." He slammed the door in the process server's face.

He returned to the living room and took possession of the couch from which he had forcibly vacated Georgie Tompkins a few minutes ago. He was just dozing off when Mrs. Binns came in to tell him that lunch was ready.

He ate four hamburger patties, while Sam Cragg stowed away seven. Georgie Tompkins did not show up for lunch.

"Where's the kid?" Sam asked.

"In the dog house. I told him no work, no eat. He didn't work."

"Serves him right. You know, I been thinkin', Johnny. This dog business might not be so bad after all. Take that fella, Faraday, he was willing to go five hundred for a mutt. Why don't

we try running an ad in the newspapers? I bet we'd sell a lot of dogs that way. We might not get five hundred for every one of them, but two or three hundred would be fine, too."

"It certainly would, Sam, but isn't it strange no one else ever thought of that stunt?"

"Huh? You mean they did?"

Johnny called to the kitchen, "Binns! Can you come here a moment?" Then when Binns ambled into the dining room, "Binns, how much advertising did Julius Cragg do?"

"Quite a lot, Mr. Fletcher. He ran half pages in all the dog magazines and in one of them, he kept a full page running the year around. The advertising wasn't profitable, of course."

"Why not?"

"Because there isn't a large demand for St. Bernards. Not at the prices we had to ask for them. Mr. Cragg mostly just sold the extras, what you might call the runts and the culls. He'd get fifty to seventy-five dollars for them. We didn't sell a half dozen really good dogs in a year."

Johnny looked at Sam. "See?"

Sam frowned. "Then, if he couldn't sell them, what was the idea of raising them?"

"I never asked Mr. Cragg that," Binns said. "He seemed to like the dogs, I guess."

"All right, Binns," Johnny said. When the dog breeder had left the room, he shook his head.

"I had a hunch about that, Sam. Dogs were a hobby with your Uncle Julius."

"If you ask me, my uncle was nuts."

"Maybe he was at that. But . . . I don't think so. Your uncle had other irons in the fire. Or have you forgotten Pete Suratt and the Pendletons so quickly. And Mr. Webb, who lives across the road."

Sam winced. "Johnny, you're not going to . . . play detective again?"

"I'm going to find out some things. I didn't have time this

morning, because I had to solve the food problem for the dogs. But that's taken care of now and —"

Sam groaned. "What do I do, take on the whole Pendleton family?"

"You were willing enough to this morning. In fact, you felt pretty good about slugging young Andy Pendleton."

"You want me to slug the bullets Pete Suratt'll toss at me with that heater of his?"

"I was just thinking about Pete. He's got a one-track mind. Seems to think he ought to collect thirty-two thousand from someone, or else."

Sam got up from the table. "Look Johnny, he was *my* uncle. I'm not the least bit curious about who killed him."

"I am, though, Sammy, and if you'll be a good boy and get out the station wagon, we'll go and see somebody."

"The Pendleton gang?"

"No, Potts. I want to ask him how come he forgot to tell you about the Pendletons and Mr. Suratt; and Mr. Webb."

"He did tell us about Webb."

"He told us a lie. I have no objection to a man telling a lie if he's got a reason, but as far's I can see at this moment, Potts had no reason to lie. So, let's go see him, huh?"

Sam got out the station wagon, but Johnny made him move over and took the wheel himself. Sam's driving was subject to criticism. He had a mistaken idea that other cars should always get out of his way. He was a roadhog, just as he was a sidewalk hog.

CHAPTER TEN

JOHNNY zoomed the car down Manchester Road, to Big Bend, then turned left to Olive Street and right again to Forest Park and over the new express highway to Grand Avenue. He drove the car into a ten-cent parking lot and then he and Sam walked a block to the building in which were located the offices of Riley, Ryan, Riordan and Potts.

It was a few minutes after one when they entered the luxuriously furnished reception room. A luscious blonde regarded them coolly from behind a crescent-shaped, modernistic desk.

"I wanted to see a lawyer," Johnny said flippantly, "but let it pass now. You'll do, instead."

"I've got a boy friend," the blonde retorted. "He's heavyweight champ of Webster Groves. What's your trouble? Criminal? Then you'll want Mr. Ryan. Domestic —"

"Skulduggery, Mr. Potts. Tell him it's his Nemesis. Johnny Fletcher to you, baby."

The blonde touched a telephone, then passed over it and flicked the switch of an interoffice communication system.

"A Mr. Fletcher to see you."

A metallic voice replied, "Tell him I'm busy or something."

"Ha-ha," laughed Johnny. He strode to a door, on which was lettered in gold, "Mr. Potts," and pushed it open.

Gerald Potts, hiding behind a *Racing Form*, said: "Did you get rid of him, Miss Abbott?"

"No," said Johnny, and chuckled as the lawyer dropped the *Racing Form*. "I got in through the door," Johnny added brightly. "Sam — you remember Sam Cragg, don't you? . . . Sam wanted to ask you a couple of questions about his estate. Go ahead, Sam."

"Huh?"

"About Suratt, Sam. You were going to ask him what he knew about Pete?"

Gerald Potts regarded Johnny coldly. "I know nothing about Pete Suratt. Except what I've read in the papers. He's a notorious gambler."

"What paper did you read that in, Potts? The *Missouri Methodist Monthly?* — that you just dropped?"

Potts' nose wrinkled distastefully. "I'm not the executor of Cragg's estate. He is, himself. I've done my duty in locating him and turning things over. The rest is up to him. It's a small estate and I obtained only a nominal fee for my services."

"Who paid you?"

"I haven't been paid yet. The court will give me a check . . . in due course of time."

"Suppose we — Sam, I mean — wanted to retain you as his attorney, Mr. Potts?"

"What for? All he needs is a good realtor, who might be able to sell the farm for a little over the mortgage. He doesn't need an attorney."

"That's where you're wrong, Mr. Potts. Sam does need an attorney. He wants to sue . . . Andrew Pendleton."

Mr. Potts' eyes glowed. "What for?"

"To recover a sum of money Julius Cragg foolishly loaned Pendleton."

"Pendleton repaid that loan. Whoever told you he didn't is misinformed."

"Then we've been misinformed. But just for the fun of it, when did Pendleton repay the money?"

"I wouldn't know that."

"Then how do you know it was paid back?"

Potts showed his teeth. "What are you getting at, Fletcher?"

"A pile of cheese, Potts. It reeks. The whole Cragg setup smells. Just a little while ago, Julius Cragg, a successful bookie, had enough money to loan a big hunk to a slot-machine manufacturer. He could afford to spend a hundred dollars a day to feed a bunch of dogs. Then he's killed and there isn't a dime lying around loose. What became of Cragg's dough?"

Potts sneered. "I wasn't his business manager, merely his attorney. You say he was a bookmaker — mind you, *you* say that — all right, if he was, maybe he took a beating."

"Maybe he did, but apparently he didn't pay off big losses. Pete Suratt claims he didn't. What did he do with the money then?"

"Perhaps he fed it to the dogs."

Johnny regarded Gerald Potts steadily for a moment, then shrugged. "Okay, Potts, I can't make you talk."

"No," said Mr. Potts.

In the anteroom, Johnny paused to talk to the blonde receptionist. "Do you like working for that sourpuss, Potts?"

"Yes," she replied crisply. "I like working for him. I particularly like it on Friday afternoon when he gives me a check for fifty dollars."

"Fifty bucks a week?"

"Well, maybe it's only fifteen. But it's awfully nice money. My landlady simply loves it. Good-bye, Mr. Fletcher."

"Not good-bye, just so long. By the way, what'll I call you when I telephone?"

"I don't accept personal telephone calls at the office."

Johnny grinned and moved to the door. Before he could open it, the blonde said: "The name's Yvonne, short for Iva."

Waiting for the elevator, Sam said: "You know, Johnny, I don't think I like that guy, Potts."

"I don't like him, too. How would you like to go out to the race track?"

Sam brightened, but slumped immediately. "With what?"

"With two dollars and seventy-five cents. A fella'd be a fool to go to the races with a roll, wouldn't he? He might lose it. On the other hand, if we go there without any money, anything we pick up is velvet."

Sam didn't remark on that until they had gone down in the elevator and were walking toward the parking lot where they had left the station wagon. Then he said: "You've got to have *some* money to make a bet."

"Who said anything about betting? That's gambling and you know I never gamble."

"Cut it out, Johnny. You're acting screwier'n hell today, and I don't like it."

"All right, then, don't ask so many questions. There's the car. We'll have to hurry to get to the track in time for the second race. The track's over in Illinois, you know."

They got the car and drove downtown to the free bridge over which they crossed to East St. Louis. Johnny gave the car all she had once they were outside the city limits and in a few minutes he saw the big race track ahead.

He paid the parking fee and they walked to the gates. Then he chuckled: "Two-twenty admission for the two of us. That'll get us into the track with a bankroll of exactly thirty-five cents. You can't go very wrong with that much, can you, Sam?"

"Where's the fun in watching horses run if you can't put a bet on them?" Sam asked in disgust. "I'd just as soon spend the two-twenty on beer."

"We're going to do a little drinking tonight, Sam. . . . If we're lucky."

He bought two grandstand tickets and they entered the park.

It was a good day and the track was well patronized. The results of the first race were just being posted.

"Hmm," said Johnny, "Ruskin won at $13.20. Not bad. Well, you've got to have a program. No, we need a program apiece. Here! . . ."

The programs cost fifteen cents apiece. Johnny handed one to Sam and opened his own to the entries for the second race.

"Well, well," he remarked. "Here's a horse looks good, Don Miguel."

"A goat," sniffed Sam. "He's a fifteen to one."

"That's what I like about him. It's only a five-horse race, so he's got one chance in five of winning. . . ."

"That's a heluva way to figure a horse race," Sam snorted. "There are four *good* horses in this race, with odds from three to two to four to one. Don Miguel hasn't got a chance."

"That may be, Sammy. You're an expert on the nags. You've certainly lost plenty on them, in your time. So here's the way we do it; first of all, you need a cigar."

"What for? I don't like cigars —"

"You need a cigar, to look the part. Here. . . ." He stepped to a stand and said:

"I want the best nickel stogie you've got."

The clerk pulled out a box of black, crooked cigars. Johnny took one and paid out his last nickel. He thrust the cigar at Sam. "Light it up, Sammy. Then you walk back and forth, studying your program until I give you the sign — don't notice me until I give you the wink."

"Hey!" cried Sam, "you can't do that!"

"What, Sam?"

"Touting."

"Oh, you're one of these narrow-minded guys who think touting isn't cricket, huh? Look, you take five average suckers at a race track. They try picking their own horses and chances are they'll all pile on the same horses — the losing horses. Now, with my system I take these five guys and persuade them each to

bet on a different horse and what's the result? One of them's bound to win — and give me a cut. Isn't that better than all of us losing?"

Sam groaned. "But touting's against the law. The Eye sees you, he'll throw you off the track."

"Who's The Eye?"

"Any race track cop is The Eye. They're all Pinkerton men and a Pinkerton man's always The Eye. The Eye's always watching you."

"Maybe he is and maybe he isn't. I'll worry about The Eye when I see him. We've got nothing to lose so I might as well give this touting business a trial."

Sam's nostrils flared. "All right, we'll get home early, then. What's the first horse, Don Miguel?"

"Yes. Light up the stogie and start walking. There's a lad over there seems to be having a hard time deciding on a horse. I'll go give him a boost."

He strolled away from Sam and sauntered over beside a man in a gray suit, who was studying his program. Johnny took out his own pencil and began making checks opposite the horses' names. After a moment, he began muttering: "Jeez, this is a tough race."

The man beside him said: "I beg your pardon?"

"I said it's a tough race to pick. What do you think of Miss Suzy?"

"She's the favorite at three to two."

Johnny made a wry face. "Hardly worth betting on, even if she wins. I wish Cragg would show up. He usually gives me my horses."

The man in the gray suit did not take up the bait, so Johnny went on: "You've heard of Cragg, haven't you? Cragg, the big betting commissioner?"

"Cragg? Uh, yeah sure."

"It isn't often a man like him misses." Johnny chuckled. "Be funny if he did, with his inside dope."

"That's the hell of this racket," the man in the gray suit said. "A few of these fellows rig up a race and the suckers like us have to guess. Well, I'll bite once more. . . . Whiplash at three to one . . ."

"Whiplash? Umm, I don't think so. I kind of like — Jeez, there he is — Cragg, the commissioner. Oh, Mr. Cragg!"

Sam, his teeth clamped over the black stogie, looked frostily at Johnny. "Hello, Fletcher," he said, with just the proper amount of distaste.

"I'm having a little trouble with this next race, Mr. Cragg," Johnny said deferentially. "What do you think of Whiplash?"

"That dog? He couldn't —" Sam leaned forward suddenly and said, "This stogie's making me sick."

Johnny beamed. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Cragg. Thank you."

Sam grunted and moved away. The man beside Johnny stirred uneasily. Johnny said joyfully: "Oh boy, oh boy!"

"He gave you a tip?" The man in the gray suit asked. "You wouldn't — you wouldn't tell a fellow, would you?"

"Tell? Oh, no. Cragg wouldn't like that. It gets out, the odds go down. He's probably got a couple of thousand on this horse himself. I don't blame him, on *this* horse."

The other man groaned. "That's the hell of this racket. A sucker like me. . . ."

Johnny caught his arm. "Look, I'm going to take a chance. I like you. Fifty bucks won't drive the odds down too far, especially since I — damn the luck — since I came out today with hardly any money on me."

"Fifty is pretty steep for me," the sucker said. "I was figuring on about ten. . . ."

Johnny dug his fingers into the other's arm. "Ten bucks on this horse? Cripes — it's Don Miguel — at fifteen to one!"

The man's eyes popped. "Don Miguel? Holy smokes — ten bucks would bring a hundred and fifty. . . ."

"And twenty would bring three hundred. Go ahead, sink it on. I'll meet you here right after the race. Okay?"

The sucker hesitated. "Okay, if Don Miguel wins — I'll slip you a piece of him."

"Swell. He'll win all right. Cragg almost never picks them wrong. Ha-ha!"

Johnny watched the sucker depart, then moved away about fifty feet and selected another victim. After his act with Sam, he reluctantly passed on the information that Miss Suzy, even though she was only a three-to-two bet, was going to win the race by eight lengths.

Ten minutes later, the horses went to the post and Johnny picked up Sam. "The trouble with this business," Johnny complained, "is that there isn't enough time between the races to tout *all* the horses. I couldn't get Copper Monkey and Red Devil."

"And one of them'll win," Sam said darkly, "which means that you'll probably get a poke in the nose, or two, from the suckers you touted those other goats to."

"Not if I see them first, Sam. You look kind of sick."

"That lousy stogie —"

"*They're off!*" screamed the crowd.

Don Miguel took the lead. At the first turn he was two lengths in front of the other horses and was still going strong. Sam said disgustedly,

"I told you Don Miguel was a goat."

"Goat? Whaddya mean? Look at him run; he's three lengths ahead now."

"So what? He'll fold in the back . The leaders always do."

In the backstretch, Don Miguel was five lengths ahead of the field. At the far turn he was six and Sam began breathing hoarsely. The five horses headed into the homestretch.

"Come on, Don Miguel!" Johnny roared. "Come on, horse!"

"Come on, Red Devil. . . . Copper Monkey!" hundreds of throats screamed.

Johnny held his breath. Numbers 3 and 5 were coming up behind Don Miguel. They were closing the distance with every

hoofbeat. Don Miguel was falling back rapidly. He had set too fast a pace. He had —

"Come on, Don Miguel!" Johnny screamed frantically.

Don Miguel, a horse on either side of him, already nosed past his withers, seemed suddenly to flatten. There was space between him and the others and then — then he was across, the winner!

"Omigod!" cried Johnny. "And I picked him."

"Now, find the sucker," Sam said excitedly. "What'd he look like?"

"I don't know. He had a gray suit. He was going to meet me over there by the post. . . ."

"Well, get over there then, Johnny. They'll be paying off and you don't want to miss him."

Johnny went over to the post and hopped about for five minutes. Sam stood near by, watching anxiously. He finally came over. "It's no use, Johnny. There's too many people here. You'll never find him."

"There you are!" said a cold voice. "And with your stooge, too."

Johnny whirled. A beefy, angry-faced man bore down on him. Johnny backed away. "Uh, too bad, wasn't it?"

"Too bad for you. You touted the wrong horse. You and your pal, Mister Betting Commissioner. Officer. . . ."

The rush of wind was Johnny and Sam departing.

They were within twenty feet of the exit gate, when Johnny put on an extra burst of speed and catching up to a man in a gray suit, cried:

"Hey, partner! Aren't you forgetting something?"

The man turned and winced. "Uh, do I know you?"

"Damn right you do," Johnny snapped. "I gave you Don Miguel, didn't I?"

Sam Cragg trotted up and scowled at the man in the gray suit. The latter fidgeted. "That's right, but uh — I didn't want to take a chance. I, uh, only put five dollars on him."

"Five?" howled Johnny. "You were putting ten on for *me*,

that's a hundred and fifty. You were trying to duck out, too . . . weren't you?"

"Come on, Johnny," whispered Sam, "The Eye's coming . . ."

"Give me twenty-five bucks," Johnny said quickly. "And we'll call it square. . . ."

"Okay, Mister," said the sucker. "Here it is . . ."

"Joe, stop those two touts!" boomed a voice.

Johnny snatched the money from the sucker and thrust it into his pocket. He pivoted away from the gate and a beefy hand caught his shoulder.

"Touting, eh?" snarled The Eye.

"I beg your pardon?" said Johnny haughtily.

The Eye shook Johnny roughly. "Don't gimme any of that. I saw you myself. And this big lug . . ."

Johnny suddenly grinned. "Why, Mr. Pinkerton, this is Sam Cragg, the nephew of old Julius Cragg . . ."

A bitter look came into the detective's eyes. "It ain't true! I don't deserve this."

"Ha!" cried Johnny. "A pal of your uncle's, Sammy. . . ."

"Pal?" winced the detective. "Me, a pal of Julius Cragg? The happiest day of my life was when they played the slow, soft music for Julius and he couldn't hear it. And now — his nephew's come to take on, where he left off. . . ."

Johnny eased his shoulder out from the detective's relaxed grip. "Well, now, maybe we can talk this over. How about a beer?"

"Can't. I'm on duty. Besides, I want nothing to do with any Cragg. It ain't healthy."

"That," said Johnny, "is what I'd like to talk about."

"With me? Uh-uh. I don't know a thing about it. What happened between Julius and — and those men, is none of my business. I'm a race-track cop, that's all. Outside this gate, they can do anything they like and I wouldn't bat an eye."

"But Pete Suratt bet with him, inside the track. . . ."

The Eye frowned uneasily. "I don't know anything about Pete Suratt. But if I was Cragg's nephew, I'd keep out of Suratt's way. He's a handy lad with shooting irons."

Johnny smiled winningly. "Now, look, you seem to be a decent sort. What would you say if I told you that Sam and me are not horse players at all?"

"After I caught you touting? That reminds me —"

"We weren't touting," Johnny said hastily. "That fella owed me some money. He got on a good horse and I grabbed him for the dough he owed me. That's all. But look, Sam's just come west. No matter what *you* think of Julius, he was Sam's uncle and Sam was fond of him. Mighty fond. The old boy was good to Sam. Yes. . . ." He frowned at Sam who was muttering under his breath, "Yes, Old Julius even left Sam his estate. A lovely farm over in Missouri, a nice bundle of stocks . . . and bonds . . ." Johnny glanced sharply at the detective. "You knew that Julius was pretty well heeled?"

The Eye nodded. "He ought to been. He practically owned this joint. I mean, there's a Jockey Club and some stockholders, but just the same, Cragg made book for all of them and you know how that is. . . ."

"I don't. But I get the general idea. Cragg was a big shot. Rated pretty high, eh? Modest boy, never bragged to his nephew."

The detective sniffed. "You mean, when he was asleep. In the old days they called him Jawing Julius. Never saw a guy who liked himself so well."

"You're pretty stuck on yourself, copper," Sam cut in.

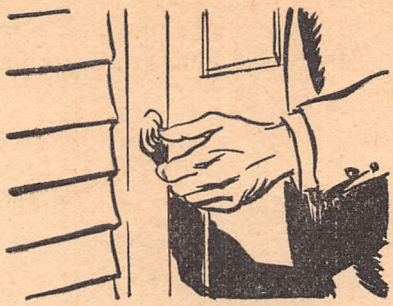
The detective grinned. "Your uncle tried to get me kicked out only the week before he was knocked off. He may have been the apple of *your* eye, but to me he was only a cinder."

"You say that about my uncle," Sam said truculently, "and I may forget you're a fly-cop and pop you two or three."

"You and who else? I blow this whistle —"

"We were just going," Johnny exclaimed. "Thanks, pal. . . . Come on, Sam. . . ." He grabbed his friend's arm and jerked him through the turnstile.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



AS THEY were walking through the parking field, Johnny chuckled. "I told you the way to go to a race track was without money. We picked up twenty-five dollars."

Sam shuddered. "It's only a miracle that we're walking away from here, without handcuffs on our mitts."

"How often have you worn handcuffs, Sam?"

"Too many times. Remember that crummy jail in Minnesota? And the one in Iowa — and I mustn't forget the bull pen in New York. . . ."

"All right, all right, forget it. I always got you out, didn't I? We made twenty-five coconuts in just a few minutes and I got some information about your uncle."

"What? I didn't hear anything."

"That's because you were listening only with your ears. I verified something that I've been suspecting all day; that Uncle Julius was a successful bookie. He made a pile of dough. But where is it?"

They found the station wagon and climbed in. It wasn't until they were on the highway heading back toward St. Louis that Sam Cragg muttered: "You s'pose there was dough and that lawyer glommed onto it?"

"I don't know who got it, but I'm convinced your uncle left a flock of kopeks. Our job is to find them."

"Well," Sam conceded, "I wouldn't mind finding it. So far my inheritance has been pretty much of a bust, but if there's going to be a bundle of the long green around somewhere, I'm for it. . . ."

"So am I. Let's run over the setup. Your uncle was knocked off by someone who plugged him three times in front of his house, then beat it in a car. Your uncle didn't leave a will, but as next of kin you're elected, thereby disappointing young Georgie Tompkins no end. . . . A smart lad, that Georgie."

"Too smart for his health."

"Agreed. Continuing with Georgie we find that he's got a crush on Susan Webb, the gal across the road, whose old man had a mad on your uncle and is continuing the mad against you to the extent that he's put pressure on the Quadlands to sell you out of home and dog business."

"If he wants to get rid of me so bad, why doesn't he make me an offer? I'm willing to listen. . . ."

"Listen then. This brings us up to Pete Suratt, fresh from Hell's Kitchen, who says your uncle welshed on a thirty-two-thousand pay-off. Maybe yes, maybe no, but Pete's a problem. And so are the Pendletons who are too damn eager to convince us that they didn't owe your uncle any mazuma. Their yarn is backed up by none other than that high-class shyster who started the daisy chain by digging you up in the first place."

"Yeah," said Sam, "you'd think he'd have saved himself some trouble by not looking for me in the first place."

"I thought of that, Sam. I haven't forgotten something else — that Lawyer Potts showed up mighty strange last night, fetching along Miss Webb, with whom yours truly has a date tonight."

"A date? Dammit, Johnny, you promised me you wouldn't start anything with a dame. . . ."

"I made no such promise, Sam. Susan is a nice dish; she's wasting herself on a squirt who isn't dry behind the ears yet.

Miss Webb ought to go out with older men — fellows about thirty-five."

"Good-bye, twenty-five bucks," Sam muttered.

"Cigarette money, Sammy. In a day or two we'll be rolling in wealth."

It was shortly after five when they returned to the dog farm. Georgie Tompkins was back on the couch in the living room, but he sprang to his feet when Johnny and Sam entered.

"I guess I'll have to burn that couch," Johnny said.

"You'll probably be burned yourself," Georgie retorted. "Your pals were here looking for you this afternoon."

"The Pendletons?"

"Three or four of them. And they were loaded for bear. So was Pete Suratt who came right after they left. He's coming back this evening."

"He must like the country air. Sam, I think we better turn fifteen or twenty dogs out into the yard, just to keep unwelcome visitors away from the house."

Georgie chuckled wickedly. "And I mustn't forget your friend, the banker."

"Henry Quadland?"

"*He* sent a process server. I mean Kunkel. He's been telephoning every ten minutes. . . . There she goes again."

Johnny turned and scowled in the general direction of the foyer. "Answer it, Sam. Tell him I'm having tea with Mrs. Van Pitcher. No, wait a minute. You can't talk to him, either. Georgie, you answer it."

Georgie snickered. "Nix. You get yourself out of your own jams."

"I'll let you smoke a cigarette, Georgie," Johnny coaxed.

"Shoot your own crows."

Johnny flexed his hands, resisting the impulse to put them about Georgie's thin neck. In the meantime, Mrs. Binns came out of the kitchen and answered the phone. Johnny listened to her: "Mr. Fletcher? I'll see if he's here."

She came to the living room door. "Mr. Fletcher, there's —"

"It's that banker again," Johnny interrupted. "He's trying to sell me some bonds. He's a hard man to refuse. Uh, you better tell him I'm out, Mrs. Binns."

"Very well, Mr. Fletcher." She returned to the phone.

Georgie sneered at Johnny. "Getting an old woman to do your dirty work. . . ."

Sam made growling noises deep in his throat and Georgie departed suddenly. Mrs. Binns came back. "It was Mr. Kunkel. He says he has to lock up, but he's sending your checkbook out and if you'd finish signing that check, he'll go back tonight and see that it's deposited for you."

"Thanks, Mrs. Binns. That's very nice of Mr. Kunkel — keeping the bank open evenings for me."

When she returned to the kitchen, Sam said anxiously: "There's going to be trouble about that check, Johnny. I can just feel it."

"I can't. I didn't *give* him the check."

"Yeah, but you used him to get credit at the butcher shops."

"No, I didn't. I just told them to ask at the bank if my credit was good. I didn't tell them it *was*. I left it all up to Dunkel. He could have told them my credit was no good."

Sam waved impatiently at Johnny. "Okay, you can always make something sound right. When do we eat?"

"Any minute, I guess. It smells like hamburger again." Johnny wrinkled up his nose. "I'll be turning into a dog if we keep on eating dog meat."

After a few minutes Binns came in. "We got a very fine inquiry this afternoon, from the advertising. Man in Saskatchewan wants to start a breeding farm and asked for a price on three dogs and six bitches. . . ."

"How much does he want to pay?" Sam exclaimed.

"Why, he offered a hundred straight, but I think we can get him up to a hundred and fifty apiece. . . ."

"Don't write him," Johnny cried, "telegraph him. No —

that's too slow. I'll telephone him. What's his name and address?"

Binns took a letter from his pocket. "The name is William J. Foley. He lives in Regina. . . ."

Johnny took the letter from Binns and strode to the telephone. "Give me long distance," he barked into the mouthpiece. "I want to get William J. Foley of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. . . . That's right. The number here is Deming 2629. What? . . ."

He winced. "All right, if that's the way you feel about it!" He slammed the receiver on the hook and strode back to the living room. "Send him an air-mail letter, Binns. No use making the telephone company rich, the so-and-so's. . . ."

Sam looked sharply at Johnny. "What's the matter?"

Johnny grinned crookedly. "Our phone service gets shut off tomorrow unless we pay the bill — a measly twenty-four bucks. . . ."

Sam groaned. "That, too!"

"That, too. But it's a blessing in disguise. The creditors won't be able to call us up."

The doorbell rang and Johnny hastened to the front door. He opened it and a sallow youth in his early twenties stuck a checkbook into Johnny's hand. "Mr. Kunkel sent me out with this. You forgot it at the bank. . . ."

"Quite so, thanks, old man." He closed the door in the youth's face. The doorbell rang again instantly. Johnny strode into the living room.

"Sam, go to the door and tell the boy outside I'm in the middle of a conference with some politicians and I'll take care of his boss's little matter tomorrow."

Sam started to protest, but seeing the scowl on Johnny's face went to the front door. Johnny heard him arguing for a minute or two, then Sam returned.

"The kid's suspicious, if you ask me."

"Let him be. Ah, there's supper!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

AFTER dinner Johnny and Sam adjourned to their room on the second floor. Johnny laid out his other suit and repaired to the bathroom to shave.

Sam watched him gloomily. "You're going in for this in a big way, Johnny."

"I'll ask her if she's got a friend — for you. Will that make you feel better?"

"No. Not this time. I don't like the setup. Too many people ringing our doorbell. I don't feel right about it. I feel like something's about to explode in our faces."

"Not tonight, Sammy. Tomorrow maybe, but not tonight! Jump into your Sunday suit and we'll have some beer and fun."

Sam brightened a little, but when he got out the station wagon a little later he was glum again. Johnny took the wheel and drove to a filling station in Deming. He bought two gallons of gas and asked the way to the Calico Cat.

"It's down here on Manchester Road," the attendant told him. "You can't miss it. It's got a big blue neon cat sign. It isn't a bad place, if you don't mind Mickey Finns."

"Mickey Finns?" Sam exclaimed. "It's that kind of a joint?"

"Well, maybe it ain't, but I took my girl there once and the bill was eight dollars. Maybe they didn't slip a Mickey Finn

in my drinks, but they robbed me just the same."

"Don't tell anyone," said Johnny, "but I'm a robber myself." He drove out of the station.

As the filling station man had told them the Calico Cat was an easy place to find, even though it was set back from the road a hundred yards or so. It was quite well patronized if the number of parked cars was any indication.

Johnny turned the station wagon over to an attendant, but watched to see where it was parked. He liked to know such things. Sometimes you had to make a quick getaway.

They walked toward the Calico Cat. Johnny, giving the huge building the once over, decided it was nothing more than a big barn with a couple of wings added. And a lot of paint and neon tubing.

A doorman let them in. There was a penny scale, a candy vendor and a handkerchief machine in the tiny foyer. They passed into a short hall and a girl snatched their hats from them. There was a pinball game beside the checkroom.

There were three pinball games just inside the huge dining room that constituted the main part of the Calico Cat. There was a dance floor in the center of the room, a midget dance floor considering the number of tables. Along one side was a bar, with high leather-covered stools in front of it. Beyond the bar was a raised orchestra platform on which a colored orchestra of half a dozen musicians were fiddling with their instruments.

"Looks like we're a little early," Johnny remarked.

"We're practically opening the joint. How about a beer at the bar, to limber up?"

Sam tugged at his friend's sleeve. "Whizbangos, Johnny!" he whispered excitedly.

"I can read," Johnny retorted. "Two beers, please."

The bartender brought them two tall thin glasses of amber fluid. Sam opened his mouth, gulped twice and set the empty glass on the bar.

"Jeez, what small beers," he complained.

The bartender put five nickels and a quarter on the bar, as change from the dollar Johnny had given him. Johnny scowled as he counted the money.

"That's the smallest nickel beer I ever paid a quarter for," he said sourly.

"Gimme those nickels," Sam said. "Maybe I can win the next beers."

"They're for amusement only," Johnny said, "the sign on them says so."

"Nuts. That's for the law. There's a box on the bottom. If you win, you press a button and it opens the box. Lemme show you."

Reluctantly, Johnny handed Sam a nickel then followed him to the pinball games. Sam shoved a nickel in the slot and a series of lights lit up the board.

Sam explained the game. "You shoot out five steel balls, one at a time. Every time a ball bumps one of those springs it registers. . . . Damn these crooks, they've boosted the score up to 16,000 for two points. It's usually 12,000, which ain't so hard to beat."

"The scoreboard registers up to 50,000."

Sam snickered. "No one ever made that score. Thirty thousand pays forty nickels. . . ."

"Forty points, it says. And fifty thousand . . ." Johnny whistled. "Five hundred points! That's twenty-five dollars. Do these things pay off that kind of dough?"

"If you're lucky, but I never heard of but one guy who was that lucky. He died from the shock. Here I go. . . ."

He worked a steel ball into the slot, then pulled back the plunger and let it slam out the ball.

Johnny watched intently. The ball bounced back and forth between a couple of feather springs, then slipped through a slot, that sent up a flicker of lights and registered a thousand

points on the scoreboard. After it passed through the slot the ball touched a coiled spring a couple of times, then ricocheted lazily toward the center. Sam, grasping the edges of the machine, nudged it gently.

The ball touched the spring, flashed a red light and registered a thousand points. Sam nudged again and again. The ball rang up six thousand points on the one spring before it finally rolled onto another. When it came to rest in the "out" slot at the bottom of the machine, the score indicator showed 8,400 points.

"Cripes," said Johnny, "how long has this been going on?"

"For years," Sam chuckled. "There's *some* things I'm good at. Beatin' these games is one of them."

"But that body English you give it, Sam," Johnny cautioned, "go easy or it'll jar the machine and tilt it. That kills the score, doesn't it?"

"Yah, but I know just how hard to jiggle it. Watch. . . ."

He sent out the second ball, but was able to touch the red thousand spring but twice this time. The rest of the "bumps," however, brought the total up to an even 11,000.

"Only five thousand more with three balls and you collect," Johnny said excitedly.

"A cinch with that start on two balls."

The third ball brought the total up to 15,800. "Easy now, Sam," Johnny whispered. "Don't tilt it and ruin the score. You can't miss."

Sam chuckled and sent out the Number 4 ball. It went through the top thousand slot and by dexterous nudging Sam brought it squarely atop the center thousand spring. Lights flickered, the scoreboard registered and before the ball finally found its resting place at the bottom, the score was 28,500.

"This is better'n working!" Johnny cried, "but for Cripe's sake, don't tilt the machine *this* time. I'll get heart failure if you do."

Sam grinned wickedly. "If it tilts this time I'll break the machine."

It didn't tilt, but that was because Sam forbore to give it the "body English." As a result, the total score was a bare 30,800.

"Two bucks I win!" Sam exclaimed. He reached to the bottom of the machine and pressed a button. A little door flew open and Sam reached in with his big fist. He brought it out full of coins . . . and cried out in consternation.

"Slugs!"

Johnny swore and snatched one of the slugs from Sam's hand. It was about the size of a nickel, but was made of lead. Stamped on it was the legend, "*For Amusement Only.*"

"They can't do this," Sam gritted. He strode to the bar and called a bartender.

"Hey, Mike, pay me!"

The bartender looked steadily at Sam. "Pay you for what?"

"For these slugs. There's two dollars' worth of them. I won them in that machine. . . ."

"Thirty thousand? That's a good score. You read the sign on the machine, 'For Amusement Only,' didn't you?"

"I did," Sam said, "but everyone knows that doesn't mean anything."

"Oh, you don't believe in signs, huh? That's too bad, Mister, because those signs mean just what they say. . . ."

"The hell they do!" Sam howled. "You gimme my dough or I'll wreck this joint, d'you hear me? . . ."

"He means it, pal," Johnny said firmly.

The bartender yawned. "Oh, does he?" He reached down below the bar and came up with a baseball bat — a large one. "Wreck ahead, Mister . . ."

"Don't!" said a voice behind Johnny.

"Oh, let 'em," said another.

Johnny whirled and looked at Susan Webb in a red velvet evening gown. Behind her was Georgie Tompkins, in dinner jacket.

"Hold it, Sam," Johnny said. "Hello, Sue. What's that with you?"

Georgie's mouth twisted. "Go ahead and wreck the joint, Fletcher. These bartenders like that. And me, I'd like to see the fun. . . ."

"George," Susan Webb said sharply. "You promised!"

"All right, Susie," said Georgie. "I won't say another word. I'll think them, from now on, but I won't say them."

"Will you and Mr. Cragg join us — at a table?" Susan asked, smiling at Johnny.

"We'll do just that. Come on, Sam, sit down and cool off."

Several tables had been filled since Johnny and Sam had arrived, but there were still plenty of them available. Susan led the way to one at the far side of the room. A waiter came instantly with the liquor card.

Georgie waved it away. "Two champagne cocktails."

Johnny snatched the card from the waiter. His eye ran rapidly down the list to "Champagne cocktails, $1.50." At the bottom of the list was "Beer, On Draught, 25 cents."

He said: "And two beers," then he looked hard at Georgie. "This is Dutch Treat, Sonny."

"You take care of your end, Fletcher," Georgie retorted haughtily. "I'll hold up mine."

Sam glowered. "Johnny means that you're going to pay for your own drinks and if beer's good enough for us it's — "

"It's not good enough for us," Georgie said firmly.

"Sam," Johnny said, "what time is it?"

"I dunno, why?"

Johnny pulled out his dollar watch. "I make it nine twenty. That leaves forty minutes. Or do you believe in letting children stay out after ten?" He looked hard at Sam Cragg. "He *is* your ward, you know, Sam. You inherited him."

"Why, you . . ." Georgie began chokingly.

"George!" Susan Webb interrupted. "And Mr. Fletcher! Will you stop treating him as if he's a child?"

"He's twenty-one — he says."

"Who says I'm not?" Georgie demanded truculently.

"Mr. Fletcher," Susan said firmly, "I asked you to be here tonight, because I wanted to get things straightened out, but if you're going to act like this . . . you're going to spoil everything."

"You said you were going to tell me something tonight, Susan. Shall we talk about it — privately?"

"That's not necessary. It also concerns Mr. Cragg — and George."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yes," Susan Webb said firmly. "I know all about Mr. Julius' failure to provide for George and I don't think it's fair."

"Neither do I," Johnny declared. "I think Georgie's entitled to at least half of what Sam inherited. Half of minus nothing is — what?"

"Will you listen?" Susan asked fiercely. "I told you I was going to tell you what the trouble was all about. I am . . . and I'm going to talk against my father's interests. He's gotten as stubborn as everyone else and it's got to stop. Understand?"

Her blue eyes went around the three masculine faces.

"All right," she continued. "Father's place consists of 160 acres, yours — Mr. Cragg's — of only 40. The T.A.A. insists on the entire two hundred. . . ."

"What're the initials?"

"Trans-American Airways. They want to build an airport near St. Louis and our farms are the flattest around and just the distance they want to be from St. Louis. Now, do you understand?"

"How much do they want to pay?"

"One hundred thousand dollars, which is a very good price."

"Your father's willing to sell his place?"

"Yes. It's Mr. Cragg who held up the sale."

"How come? If he was broke you'd think he'd be glad to pick up fifty thousand — "

Susan Webb exclaimed angrily, "Oh, you! That's it — that's what started the whole trouble. Of course Mr. Cragg would have been glad to get fifty thousand dollars. He said so, but you're being as stupid as he was. Stupid or stubborn. Father has 160 acres. Mr. Cragg — "

"Don't tell me again. Only forty acres." Johnny grinned. "In other words your old — your father, thinks he should have four fifths of the money, since his property consists of four fifths of the total. . . ."

"Of course. That's so reasonable I don't see how anyone could think differently."

"Still," said Johnny, "the air company won't buy unless it can get the whole two hundred. Your father can't sell without our forty."

"Mr. Cragg's forty," corrected Susan.

"Sam's forty. Well, it looks to me as if Sam sort of has your father across a barrel."

Susan Webb slumped. "Mr. Fletcher, do you mind awfully — just for a moment, if I talked to Mr. Cragg? After all, it *is* his property, you know."

"What Johnny says sounds good to me," Sam said gruffly. "Your old man can't sell without us, can he? Why should he get four fifths of the dough?"

"Now, wait, Mr. Cragg. Father doesn't *have* to sell, but what about you? Isn't there a mortgage on your farm — fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Sure, and we owe a lot of money besides . . . I guess. If I sell, I come out without a dime — "

"If you don't sell," cut in Georgie Tompkins, "you may find yourself behind the eight ball. If you know what I mean."

"I don't, Georgie," Johnny said coldly. "Anyway, whose side are you on? And where would you make out if Sam sold for just enough to cover the debts?"

"That," said Susan Webb, "is what I've been trying to explain for the last half hour. Father doesn't have to sell his

place, but he wants to. He — has some other interests. Therefore, to cut a long story short — and to settle the whole matter — he's willing to go as high as thirty thousand."

"He told you to make us that offer?" Johnny asked bluntly.

Her nostrils flared. "He did not! He'd be furious if he even knew I had talked to you. But I know he'll pay that if he's approached properly."

"Well," said Johnny, "that's ten thousand clear — "

"Five," corrected Susan. "George is to have five thousand."

"Who says so?"

"I do. . . . He has a right to it. Mr. Julius was going to send him to college. That five thousand will take him there."

"Wait a minute," said Sam. "What about the bloodhounds?"

"George is willing that you have them."

Sam bared his teeth. "Oh, he is, is he? How long do you think my five grand would last, if I had to buy chow for that herd of elephants? I'll tell you what, I'll give him the dogs — all of them — and I'll take the ten thousand."

"Round seven coming up," Georgie Tompkins muttered.

"Quiet, youngster," Johnny said. "Furthermore, Miss Webb, there are holes in your story. Holes big enough for our St. Bernards to run through. You forgot Mr. Peter Suratt. And the Four Flying Pendletons!"

"That was nicely timed, Fletcher," said Georgie Tompkins suddenly. "Look behind you! . . ."

Johnny jerked around — and winced.

Andy Pendleton, Junior, was bearing down upon him. With him was a man an inch taller and ten pounds heavier, otherwise a twin of Andy.

"Hello, Mr. Fletcher," Andy Pendleton said. "Meet my brother, Angus."

Angus Pendleton nodded vigorously. "You were right, Andy, he does look like a troublemaker. So you were going to wreck my place, Mr. Fletcher?"

"*Your* place?"

"Uh-huh, I own the Calico Cat. . . ."

Sam pushed back his chair. "If you birds are lookin' for trouble. . . ."

"Oh, no, Mr. Cragg," said Andy Pendleton mockingly. "You're the one was lookin' for trouble."

Susan Webb pushed back her chair and got up. "George, take me home."

Johnny Fletcher looked at the truculent Pendletons. "I think we'll go home, too."

"So soon?" asked Angus Pendleton. "Why don't you stay around awhile? We're going to give away favors and have fun."

"Speaking of favors," declared Sam Cragg, "what kind of a joint is this that would put slugs in their pinball games? I run up a score of thirty thousand and what do I get for it? A handful of lead."

"You made thirty thousand on a Whizbango?" Andy Pendleton asked unbelieving.

"Thirty thousand," snapped Sam, "and I want my two bucks."

"You're crazy, Cragg. Nobody ever made thirty thousand on a Whizbango — "

"I made it," howled Sam. "Johnny saw me do it — "

"That's right," Johnny agreed. "And he's got the slugs to prove it."

"Keep them as souvenirs," said Angus flippantly. "Hey you, young fellow," to Georgie Tompkins who was walking off, "you haven't paid your check."

Georgie came back and tossed a crumpled five-dollar bill on the table. "Keep the change, waiter," he sneered.

Johnny saw Susan and Georgie leaving and began edging toward the door. "Come on, Sam," he said, "we don't want any trouble tonight."

Sam followed him reluctantly. As they received their hats at the checkroom Sam plunked a lead slug on the counter. "There's your tip, Sister!"

He gave another slug to the attendant who brought the station wagon to the door. George and Susan had already disappeared.

As he drove the station wagon out to Manchester Road, Johnny said fretfully: "I wonder if she knew the Pendletons owned the Calico Cat when she made the date with me?"

"She must have known, Johnny," growled Sam. "You know why I left that dump without smacking those two Pendletons? The place was a trap. There were a half-dozen bouncers around with saps, waiting to light into us. At that, I wouldn't have minded the saps, but Andy Pendleton was packing a rod — "

"*This* is a rod," said a smooth voice behind them. Something round and cold was pressed against the back of Sam's neck. A duplicate was touched against Johnny's neck.

Johnny groaned. "Now, what?"

"Now, we'll talk about that thirty-two thousand," said Pete Suratt. "You birds been giving me the run-around today."

"For the love of mike, Suratt, you've got a one-track brain. We don't know anything about that thirty-two grand."

"Then why'd you go out to the track this afternoon?"

"How d'you know we were out there?"

"I got eyes to see. You worked a neat tout. Still insist you don't know anything about horses?"

"I couldn't tell a race horse from a St. Bernard dog."

Suratt exhaled wearily. "All right, turn left at the next paved road."

"We're not going that way."

"Oh yes, we are."

"Like ducks," cried Sam. "G'wan, Johnny, he wouldn't dare."

"No, I wouldn't," said Suratt. He removed the pressure of the gun from Sam's neck and brought the weapon down upon his head.

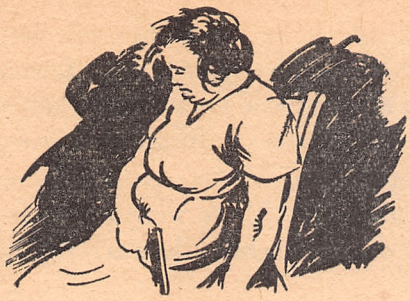
Sam cried out in pain and lurched forward. Suratt leaned over and smashed his gun again on Sam's head. All this while his left-hand gun remained firmly against Johnny's neck.

A cold feather of fear was slithering up and down Johnny's

spine. He gasped in horror as Sam's limp body collapsed against him. The big fellow wasn't faking. He was out cold.

"Make the turn, Fletcher," Suratt said tonelessly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE house was back from the road almost a quarter of a mile. Even as they approached, Johnny could scarcely make out the lights, because of the heavy shrubbery that grew to a height of six or seven feet.

He stopped the station wagon a short distance from the house, and in accordance with Pete Suratt's order gave three quick toots with the horn.

A rectangle of light appeared in the gloom and a man came out.

"Pete?" he called.

"Pete," Suratt replied. "Tell Maggie to come out. I got a sack of flour for her." He prodded Johnny with the gun. "All right, Stupid, climb down."

Johnny got out from behind the wheel. He paused to feel Sam Cragg's face, then turned toward the house and gasped. One of the biggest, fattest women he had ever seen was completely filling the doorway of the house.

"This way, Maggie," Suratt called.

The Amazon waddled up. In the semi-gloom Johnny guessed that she weighed all of three hundred pounds and that most of the weight was muscle and bone. She reached into the station wagon and dragged Sam Cragg out as if he had been the sack of flour Suratt had spoken about.

She twisted a ham into his coat collar and dragged him, heels dragging, to the house. Johnny followed, fascinated.

The room in which he found himself was a combination kitchen-living room of the poorer type of farmhouse. There was a wood-burning range, an oilcloth covered table, cupboards and several chairs — the chairs reinforced with wire.

Maggie dumped Sam in the center of the room. Johnny stooped to examine him. There were a couple of ugly bruises on Sam's head, one just behind the ear. But his breathing was regular.

"Maybe you'll realize that I'm not joking now, Fletcher," Suratt said.

Johnny straightened. He looked around the circle of faces; Suratt, a nondescript anemic-looking man of about thirty, and the Amazon. She weighed more than Suratt and the other man together.

Johnny ran the tip of his tongue around his lips. "I still don't know anything about thirty-two thousand, Suratt. If there's that much money around Cragg's place, we haven't been told about it. All Sam got out of his inheritance was a bunch of overdue bills . . . and a headache."

"I'm warning you, Fletcher," Suratt said in a cold, dead tone. "Julius Cragg had thirty-two grand. He asked me to come out and pick it up. When I got there he'd been bumped. Now, I want my dough and I want it now! . . ."

"I told you the truth, Suratt," Johnny insisted. "We haven't got any money."

"That's a lie, Fletcher. I've been watching you — everything you've done. I saw you go to the bank. I saw a couple of tons of hamburger going out to your place. You must have found the cache, because the packing company had shut off your credit."

Johnny groaned in surrender. "You know that? All right, you win. We found the money. . . ."

"Where is it, Fletcher? I want it — "

"You can't have it until tomorrow. It's . . . in the bank. I took it there today."

"Goddam you."

"I can't do anything about it, Suratt. In the morning — "

"In the morning's too late, you —!"

Maggie lumbered forward. "Lemme handle 'im, Petie."

"I've got a good notion to, Maggie," said Suratt. "If he's lying, tomorrow morning."

Johnny, looking at the fat face of the woman, saw her piggish eyes light up. A little shudder ran through him. "I'll go with you to the bank tomorrow morning, Suratt."

"You will like hell. You'll telephone the bank."

"All right, they'll give you the money."

A tiny frown creased Suratt's forehead for a moment. Then he said, "I got some things to clean up, Maggie. You and Gasper will have to watch them. Better tie them up."

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Petie," said Maggie. "I can handle them alone — without Gasper."

Suratt nodded and handed the short-barreled gun to Maggie. Then he took a twin of the gun from his coat pocket, examined it and put it away again. "I'll be back in a couple of hours, Maggie."

He went out. Johnny waited until he heard the motor of the station wagon, then moved toward Maggie. Maggie, with surprising speed for one so big, hit him in the stomach. Johnny gasped and sat down on the floor.

The female mountain sneered. "You can't take it, twerp? None of you skinny weasels can. You're just about the size of Nat, my husband, damn his black soul. He was going to walk out on me, because I was too fat. . . ."

Her slitted eyes glittered at Johnny. "You know what I did to him? I busted his skinny neck and threw him down the well. I hate all skinny men."

"What about Gasper?" Johnny said.

"Gasper's different," Maggie retorted. "He's got T.B. No

other woman would have anything to do with him. He's dying, anyway. . . ."

As if to verify her statement, Gasper began coughing. It was a deep rasping cough. Blood flecked his lips. Johnny could scarcely control a shudder.

"You think you're better off, you — !" Maggie snarled. "You think Pete's going to let you live, after he gets that money from you?"

"I'm not that stupid," Johnny said. "Pete won't lay his hands on a nickel of that money, unless we walk out of here. . . ."

"That's what you think, twerp. Get up on your feet."

Johnny started to obey. The behemoth kicked him in the stomach. Johnny went back to the floor, gasping in agony. A huge hand reached down and caught his coat, shirt and some of his skin and yanked him to his feet. Maggie cuffed him with her free hand. She either forgot that she held the short-barreled revolver in that hand or didn't care. Perhaps it didn't make any difference; her bare hand was heavy enough to smash Johnny into unconsciousness.

Johnny Fletcher was at his best before large audiences, but when he really put his mind to it, he was hard to beat even in individual salesmanship. His mind was on this particular job, in fact his heart and soul were in it, for the sale meant a lot.

Johnny gave the prospect everything, but the old fellow with the gray beard shook his head. "No, Johnny," he said, "I'm not counting the hotel managers, because when you're cold and sleepy you've a right to a nice, warm bed. I'm not even counting the restaurant men, because we don't use money up here and a man's got a right to eat. But what about all those others you've swindled at one time or another?"

"You mean that banker in Deming, St. Peter?" Johnny asked. "I didn't exactly get any money from him, you know. Anyway — the dogs were hungry. I couldn't stand to hear them — "

"I know," said St. Peter. "I wasn't referring to the banker.

We don't allow bankers up here, you know. I'm not kicking about fellows like that. But what about Mort Murray, the chap who sells you the books? He's a nice fellow and you've treated him pretty shabby at times. You promised to pay him for his books when you had the money and when you had it, you went out and squandered it."

"You've got me there, St. Peter," Johnny said sadly. "Mort's a swell guy. I'm really sorry about him. . . ."

"You should be. And what about that detective you talked out of forty dollars and never repaid? *He* was a pretty decent sort, you know."

"But he was a cop and you know what cops have done to me, at one time or another."

"That's true, Johnny. I might be willing to overlook that. But what about those three men you touted yesterday? Only one of them won, you know."

"Necessity again, St. Peter. Yeah, that's it, necessity. I've never really skinned anyone unless it was an absolute necessity. You've got it all down in your book, haven't you? You ought to know? . . ."

"I do know, Johnny. That's why I can't let you in — yet. better try it a while longer. Sorry, old boy. . . ."

Johnny opened his eyes. He was lying flat on his back. Maggie, the giantess, was sitting in a massive, reinforced rocking chair. The muzzle of the revolver protruded from one fat fist. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open. Noise that sounded like a train, chugging up a forty per cent grade, came from her mouth.

He rolled his head to the right and saw Gasper stretched out on the floor, covered with a patched quilt, He, too, was asleep.

Something was digging into his left side. He turned his head in that direction and discovered that it was Sam Cragg's elbow. Cautiously Johnny felt Sam's wrist. It was warm and the pulse was beating steadily, but Sam was still out.

He lifted his head and a floor board creaked. There was an interruption in the chugging of the locomotive and Johnny dropped his head back and closed his eyes.

When the engine resumed its climb he opened his eyes again.

Damn her, her rocking chair blocked the door. Gasper was lying in front of the only window in the room. He could handle Gasper easily enough, but what about Maggie? Gasper would squeak and the old woman had a gun. That she would use it, he well knew.

He nudged Sam and a low moan escaped the big fellow's lips. Maggie's snoring stopped. The woman slept as lightly as a cat. It was sixty seconds or more before she started snoring again. Johnny wondered if he could bound up and tear the gun from her hand. He doubted it. She had a pretty secure grip on it.

He let his eyes roam carefully about the sparsely furnished room, seeking a weapon. A chair? Perhaps, but they were none too sure. Johnny had once seen a chair broken over Sam's head, without any quick effect. Maggie was much flabbier than Sam; the fat would be protection, as would the thick mop of hair on her head.

Sam's body twitched against Johnny. He touched it to quiet Sam and his fingers poked coins in Sam's coat pocket. Many coins. He closed his eyes for a moment, in case Maggie should stop snoring.

And then he gasped softly. They weren't coins in Sam's pockets. They were lead slugs, two hundred of them that he had won at the Calico Cat. No, only one hundred and ninety-eight. Sam had disposed of two.

One hundred and ninety-eight lead slugs.

Cautiously, Johnny raised his right foot up to his chest and unlaced his shoe. He removed it and set it carefully on the floor. Then he slipped off his sock.

Holding it in his right hand he reached carefully into Sam Cragg's coat pocket and gently, so they would not clink, brought out several lead slugs. He stuffed them into the toe of the sock.

He repeated the process again and again, taking extreme care. The entire transaction occupied about ten minutes, because he had to stop two or three times when Maggie's heavy breathing became ragged.

He finally finished the task, however. Then he very carefully gripped the sock by the toe and put a knot in it, so the coins were all confined in one place. He swung the thing by the top of the sock and hope welled up in him.

The weighted sock was as lethal a homemade blackjack as it was possible to make.

There remained now only the little business of getting within striking distance of Maggie. He raised his head cautiously. A floorboard squeaked, but not loud enough to stop the snoring. He sat up and looked at Maggie, six feet away. A quick bound, a paralyzing blow on the fat hand containing the revolver and —

Sam Cragg groaned and kicked on the floor with his heels. Maggie's snoring stopped.

Johnny catapulted up from the floor, hurtled toward Maggie. And even as he shot through the air, he saw her big hand whip up.

He struck desperately with the blackjack. It whacked against her fist, just as the gun exploded. It was enough to deflect Maggie's aim, but it wasn't hard enough a blow to dislodge the weapon from her firm grasp.

In the flash before her pain-stricken hand could swing to cover him anew, Johnny knew that he had to do it. He didn't want to hit a woman — even one like the horrible Maggie — but it was his life and Sam's.

He swished sidewards with the blackjack, slapped it against her chin and as bone crunched, whirled and struck again. Maggie let out a scream like a stuck pig and went over backwards, taking the rocking chair with her in one tremendous crash.

Johnny saw the short-barreled revolver fly from her hand and scooped it up the instant it hit the floor. He whirled with it to cover Gasper, who had scarcely rolled out of his quilt.

"Hold it!" he cried.

Gasper blinked at him. Maggie screamed and screamed. Sam Cragg kicked the floor and sat up suddenly. "Cripes, Johnny!" he exclaimed.

"Sam," said Johnny, in relief. "You all right?"

Sam shook his head. His face was battered and bruised. "I feel okay, Johnny; what's the matter with the battle-axe?"

"I broke her jaw."

Maggie's screams were fading into blubbers. Johnny helped Sam to his feet. The big fellow was pretty rocky. Johnny himself felt as if he'd gone through a clothes mangle. His back hurt him, and the pain in his stomach almost doubled him. He slipped the sock blackjack into his pocket and put his shoe on his bare foot.

"C'mon, Sam, let's beat it. Suratt may be back any minute."

"Jeez, what a woman!" Sam said, awe in his tone.

Johnny wouldn't even look at her. He went to the door and jerking it open, stepped out into the night. The cool air made him gasp, but also made him stronger after a moment. Sam walked wobbily beside him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT WAS two thirty in the morning when Johnny Fletcher paid off the taxi driver in front of the Cragg Dog Farm. As they turned to the gate, Sam caught his arm.

"The kid's throwing a party, Johnny. Look, all the lights — and the cars!"

There were three or four cars in the farmyard and almost every light in the big house seemed lit. Johnny began muttering under his breath and then he saw the shape of one of the cars in the yard. It had a large, closed body.

"Something's up, Sam," he said in a low tone. "Let me do the talking."

He pushed open the gate and started toward the house. A man materialized out of the shadows and challenged: "Who're you?"

"Who're you?" Johnny retorted. "We live here."

"Oh," said the shadow. "Well, step right into the house. They're waiting for you."

Johnny opened the front door and stepping to the living room, peered through a haze of smoke at a roomful of people. Several he knew, most of them he didn't. Unerringly he picked out the man in charge, a heavy-set man of about forty. He wore a tan hat — in the house — that was big for Missouri, but would have been small in Oklahoma.

Johnny said, "Hello, Chief. Who poisoned Oscar?"

A sudden hush fell upon the room. The man Johnny had addressed thrust his hands into his coat pockets. "You'll be Fletcher. What makes you think anybody poisoned anyone?"

"Oscar's a dog. He didn't bark when we came in, so something happened to him. I didn't think you'd turn out such a big crowd for a dog."

"Mr. Fletcher," said Susan Webb, "this is Sheriff Lindstrom. Be careful, something has — "

"I'll handle this, Miss Webb," the sheriff cut in crisply.

Johnny let his eyes roam quickly about the room. Miss Webb and her father were both present. So was George Tompkins, in shirt sleeves. And Mrs. Binns, sitting in a Morris chair, her face tear-stained, her eyes red from weeping.

Arthur Binns was missing.

"Where's Binns?" Johnny asked, quickly, and watching, saw Mrs. Binns' hands fly up to her face.

The sheriff regarded Johnny steadily. "He's dead," he finally said, flatly. "And — what's happened to you and Cragg?"

For the first time Johnny was aware of his disheveled appearance. He looked at Sam Cragg's battered face, with dried blood on it, and wondered if his own face looked as bad.

He said: "We were in an accident. What happened to . . . Binns?"

"Where were you between eleven and one o'clock?" Sheriff Lindstrom countered.

"In a house two miles from Kirkwood. A woman named Maggie lives there — "

"Maggie what?"

Johnny shrugged. "She didn't tell us. A man named Suratt stuck guns in our backs and took us there."

James Webb sniffed audibly. Johnny, watching the skepticism on the sheriff's face, guessed that rocky times were just ahead.

Sam Cragg began muttering and the sheriff turned on him. "And you, Mr. Cragg?"

"I was with Johnny and it's the truth," Sam growled. "Anybody says it isn't — "

"Now, now," the sheriff said. "Nobody's accused you of anything . . . yet. A man was killed here tonight and it's my duty to ask some questions."

Johnny turned up the palms of his hands and shrugged. He let his eyes settle upon Susan Webb, as the sheriff talked.

"Where were you between eleven and one?"

"In a house owned by a woman named Maggie. We were taken there forcibly by a gangster named Pete Suratt."

"You said that before, Fletcher. I want statements I can check on."

"You won't be able to check on these. I imagine Maggie's made herself scarce by this time. I'm afraid I broke her jaw . . . I hope!"

The sheriff was startled. "What's that?"

Johnny made a wry face. "This Maggie is a damsel weighing about three hundred and twenty-five pounds. She's tougher than Gargantua, the gorilla. She beat the he— she's the one battered up me and Sam."

"A woman? . . ."

One of Sheriff Lindstrom's men cleared his throat. "There *is* such a woman, Sheriff. She lives on Curry Road, near Kirkwood. When I was on the Kirkwood force we had trouble with her. . . ."

The sheriff gave his man a dirty look. "We'll check on her later. Now what's this story of Suratt, Fletcher? Why should he kidnap you?"

"That's the point. I tried to argue it with Pete, but he's a stubborn cuss."

The sheriff turned to George Tompkins. "George, did you ever hear of this man Suratt?"

George nodded. "Uh-huh. He claims Julius welshed on a bet. I don't see how he figured to get the dough from Fletcher and Cragg — "

"All right, all right, George," the sheriff said somewhat hastily. "I'll look into Suratt. But, Fletcher, I've got to have more than your unsubstantiated word that you and Cragg were where you say between those hours."

"How about the Kirkwood taxi driver, who just brought us out here?"

"He's been with you since one o'clock?"

"No, of course not. We only picked him up a half hour ago. In Kirkwood. We got away from Maggie's place a few minutes after one."

"That's only your word. Miss Webb, you said that you last saw them around ten o'clock."

"That's right. At the Calico Cat."

"It was ten minutes after ten," Georgie Tompkins said. "They were just getting into an argument with the management."

"Thanks for the character reference," Johnny said sarcastically.

Georgie smirked.

The sheriff frowned. "You see my position, Fletcher? You have approximately four hours unaccounted for — from ten minutes aften ten until approximately two o'clock. . . ."

"In your opinion, Sheriff," Johnny said. "Suratt and the Maggie girl accounted for us during those hours."

"You said yourself you thought those witnesses would be hard to locate."

"A three-hundred-pound woman? Sheriff!"

The sheriff reddened. "I expect to send out an alarm for her. Naturally. But — "

Johnny said quickly: "Just how was Binns killed?"

"Shot. Three times."

"When?"

"Sometime between eleven and one."

"You mean no one heard the shots? *Three* shots?"

Sheriff Lindstrom scowled. "Mrs. Binns had gone to sleep. Her husband usually went out to the dog kennels around eleven

o'clock to check up on the dogs for the night. She didn't miss him until she awakened about a quarter to one and found that he had not come to bed. She then called George Tompkins —"

"Georgie was home by then?"

"I was," snapped George. "I got home at twenty minutes to eleven and I can — I can prove it." He looked at Susan Webb.

The girl shot a quick glance at her father, who was already frowning. Johnny looked at her steadily and she nodded.

"George brought me straight home from the Calico Cat. It was after ten thirty."

"And I saw her come in," James Webb declared testily.

"And you didn't hear the shots, Georgie?" Johnny asked. "The *three* shots?"

"My room's on the far side of the house from the kennels. Besides I sleep soundly. My conscience is clear. . . ."

"What about Oscar, Georgie? Was he around when you came in?"

Georgie hesitated, then finally shook his head. "I don't remember. I'm so used to him around. But come to think of it, now, I don't believe he was around. I didn't think anything of it at the time."

"How was Oscar killed?"

Sheriff Lindstrom glowered. "You said it right off the bat. He was poisoned. Which is damn — excuse me — which is darn funny."

"Why?"

"That the dog was poisoned? Well, isn't it? Somebody shoots Binns, but poisons the dog. If he had a gun, why didn't he just shoot the dog?"

Johnny put his tongue in his cheek. "Why, Sheriff, that should be obvious. He had to get past the dog to get at Binns. If he shot Oscar, he'd have a heck of a time shooting Binns. I'm figuring that from my own viewpoint. Somebody shoots a dog fifty feet from me, five seconds later, I'm on the other side of the railroad tracks, two miles away. . . ."

The sheriff bared his teeth in a snarl. "This is no joking matter, Fletcher."

"Who was joking? I was trying to establish a point. Sam and I wouldn't have had to poison Oscar to get at Binns. He was our dog, you know."

"*Your* dog? I thought Cragg owned this place?"

"He does, Sheriff. But Oscar didn't know that. The lawyer didn't tell Oscar — "

"I warned you to cut the comedy, Fletcher!" cried the sheriff.

Johnny sighed wearily. "Then stop accusing me of something I didn't do. What motive would I — or Sam Cragg — have had for killing Arthur Binns? We never saw him until yesterday. We had nothing against him. We *liked* him."

"C-can I say something, Mister Sheriff?" Mrs. Binns cut in. "My husband, Arthur, was telling me only this evening, after supper, what fine gentlemen they were. He said — he said they treated him fine."

Lindstrom's forehead creased. "But you said your husband had no other — no enemies."

"Oh, he didn't. I don't know why anyone would want to — to do that to him. He was such a good man and he liked his work and . . ." That was as far as Mrs. Binns could get. She burst into tears.

Susan Webb went quickly to her side and after a moment, conducted the housekeeper to the kitchen. The sheriff waited uneasily until she had gone, then he said to Johnny:

"I admit there seems no motive for anyone to have killed Binns, a mere handyman. Unless . . ." He cleared his throat and scowled. "Unless there's something to that story of the thirty-two thousand dollars."

"I doubt if Binns even knew that Julius was a bookie," cut in Georgie Tompkins.

"Bookie, did you say? Julius Cragg. . . ."

Georgie snickered. "*You* didn't know he was a bookie?"

"Me? How should I have known?" The sheriff began indig-

nantly enough, but eased off. "I mean, I didn't know him very well. I always thought him a respectable citizen."

Georgie smiled insolently at the sheriff and the law officer turned hastily away. "Well, men, there doesn't seem to be anything else we can do here tonight. Uh, Mr. Fletcher, I mean, Mr. Cragg, I'll leave a guard."

"We've got two hundred guards here," Johnny said smiling. "We can turn them loose in the yard."

"No, no. You mustn't. There might be — some clues around. Can't see now in the dark, but I figure to go over the place tomorrow."

"Oh, sure. Bring your magnifying glass."

Sheriff Lindstrom went to the door, but paused to fix Johnny with a malevolent glance before going out. His men filed out after him.

Georgie and James Webb remained in the room with Johnny and Sam. Webb craned his neck toward the kitchen, evidently impatient for his daughter to return so he could take his own leave. When Susan didn't show up he moved to the fireplace and stood with his back against it.

"We may as well have this out, Cragg," he said, addressing Sam. "It seems that my daughter has already made overtures — without my approval, mind you. The thing is simply this, I need your farm to sell along with mine to the T.A.A. I'm willing to make you a reasonable offer — twenty-five thousand. . . ."

"Thirty was the offer, Mr. Webb," Johnny said.

"*I* didn't make that offer."

"Well, we hadn't accepted it, anyway."

"What do you mean? You want *more?*"

"Uh-huh, fifty grand."

Webb gave Johnny a savage, contemptuous glance. Then he stamped to the kitchen door. "Susan!"

Johnny leaned casually against the fireplace. "People always get big money for farms they sell to airplane and railroad companies. I've seen it in the movies. You're not getting enough

from this outfit, Mr. Webb. If they've offered a hundred thousand, they'll go a hundred and fifty — "

"Susan!" cried James Webb. "We've got to go home."

"Maybe you're not a good salesman, Mr. Webb," Johnny continued. "Now, for fifty per cent of the grand total I'd be glad to handle the thing myself. I'm a very good salesman, one of the best in the country. . . ."

Susan Webb came into the room. She shot a look at her father's angry face and walked quietly to the door.

"Good night."

"Good-bye!" snapped her father.

Johnny shook his head as the door was slammed. "These business tycoons get so mad."

"You certainly put your foot into it that time," said Georgie Tompkins. "You've killed the deal."

"Now, Georgie," Johnny chided, "little boys don't understand such things. Mustn't interfere with grownups . . . or you're liable to get your back teeth knocked out."

Georgie walked furiously out of the room. Then Sam Cragg belabored Johnny. "This is one time I side with the kid, Johnny. Thirty grand is thirty grand. You know how deep we're in this joint."

"I do know, Sam. That's why I'm holding out for more money."

"But that's enough, Johnny. Even with the debts and the mortgage there'll be ten thousand clear. That's a lot of dough in any man's language."

"What about the boy? The Webb girl wants you to give him five thousand."

"That'd still leave us five thousand — "

"Dog feed, Sam. Yeah, that'd be just about enough to feed the dogs for a month. By the way, what would you do with the dogs if you sold the farm?"

"Turn them loose on the country," Sam snarled. "What the hell do I care about the dogs?"

"Well, *I* care about them. I'm thinking of Oscar. Why would anyone want to poison him?"

"I knew it!" Sam howled. "It's not the farm or the money. It's the detective stuff. You want to play around with that. I told you before that Uncle Julius was *my* uncle — "

"But Binns wasn't. Why would anyone want to kill a harmless old fellow like him?"

"I don't know," Sam said desperately. "I'm sorry about him, but — I'm black and blue from the walloping I already got tonight. . . ."

"That's another thing, Sam. Are we going to take a thing like that and not fight back? Are you a man or a mouse, Sam?"

"I'm a fool, Johnny. And so're you — " He stopped and an expression of surprise broke out on his face. It slowly changed and suddenly he began chuckling.

"Ha-ha," Johnny laughed mirthlessly.

"It just struck me as funny, Johnny. That fat slob, Maggie. I never had a fight with a woman before. But you — you treated her just as if she'd been a man."

"I laugh again," Johnny said coldly. "Ha-ha! That woman hit me harder than I was ever hit in my life. Come on. Let's go rest our weary bones."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DESPITE the tragedy that had befallen her, Mrs. Binns had breakfast on the table at eight o'clock the next morning. It was a good, substantial breakfast, too.

When they had eaten, Johnny said to Georgie Tompkins, "You'll have to look after the dogs, today."

"Me?" exclaimed Georgie. "D'you know how much work there is to just feeding a half ton of meat to them?"

"Sam'll help you."

Sam yelped. "Ixnay, Johnny! You know how I feel about the mutts. . . ."

"It'll be just until I can get a man, Sam." Under his breath he added, "In a few days."

Sam remained sullen. "What're you figuring to do today?"

Johnny shook his head. "Lot of things to straighten out."

The doorbell rang and Johnny went hastily from the dining room to the living room. Sam Cragg followed him. After a moment Mrs. Binns came in.

"A man named Poling to see you, Mr. Fletcher."

"I don't know any Poling. What's he look like? . . ."

Mr. Poling poked his head into the room behind Mrs. Binns. "See?" he said brightly. He whipped a sheaf of folded papers from his pocket.

He thrust them at Sam Cragg. "Some presents for you, Mr. Cragg."

"Summonses," cried Sam.

"Four," added the process server. "Deming Packing Company, M & G Grocery, Hochkiss Provision Company and William Quadland. Good morning, gentlemen!"

He beat Johnny to the door. It had scarcely slammed in Johnny's face, than it was pushed open by another bright-eyed young man.

"Mr. Fletcher," the second young man said. "Mr. Kunkel insists that you sign that check you forgot yesterday." He handed a fountain pen to Johnny, smiling. Johnny remembered his retort of the evening before, of having lost his fountain pen.

He said coldly. "Can you beat it? I mislaid my checkbook. I was looking for it just a minute ago. . . ."

"I was afraid of that," said the bank's bright young man, "so I brought along a blank check. Here it is. . . ."

Johnny took the blank check and placed it against the door. He jabbed the fountain pen against it, coughed wrackingly and crumpled the point of the pen. "Jeez!" he cried, "I'm sorry about that. But don't let it worry you. Sam — Mr. Samuel Cragg — is running to town in half an hour. He'll buy you a new pen . . . when he brings the check. 'Morning!" Johnny closed the door firmly.

The bell rang again, but Johnny did not heed it. He went out of the house by the back door and fairly ran to the garage. He was backing out the station wagon when Sheriff Lindstrom drove into the yard in a huge limousine. There were three deputies with him and they unloaded several boxes and black bags.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Fletcher?" the sheriff asked.

"Yeah, to the bank. Mind?"

"How soon you coming back?"

"Half hour, more or less. Okay?"

Lindstrom nodded reluctantly. Johnny shifted into second

and raced the car out of the yard. As he turned into Manchester Road he glanced back and saw the sheriff's limousine following. He slowed down a bit to study the car in his rear-vision mirror, then noting that there was only one of the deputies in the limousine he stepped on the accelerator.

He roared through Deming at better than fifty miles an hour, safe in the feeling that most of the local law was out at the farm.

On Big Bend he stopped the car and walked a full block to a drugstore. He ordered a chocolate soda, put the money for it on the counter and leaving the soda untouched walked to a telephone booth. Instead of entering the booth, however, he dodged through a door just beside it and walking quickly through a passageway came out on a side street. He ran down it to the corner and saw the sheriff's deputy just entering the drugstore.

He got into the station wagon, made a quick U-turn and turned right at the nearest corner. For several minutes he dodged in and out among side streets before returning to Big Bend Road.

Fifteen minutes later he drove through Forest Park and coming out on Kingshighway, headed north. He continued on Kingshighway for almost three miles, when he suddenly whistled. On the right was a six-story building that occupied almost a half block of space.

A huge sign at the corner of the building read: "Pendleton Novelty Company."

He parked the station wagon at the curb and walking to the main entrance, entered a modernistically designed reception room. A blonde who could have adorned any burlesque show line-up, sat behind a desk that was all chromium and mahogany.

Two salesmen were leaning over the desk, talking animatedly to the receptionist.

"Excuse me," Johnny said mockingly, "can a customer see a man about some business?"

The salesmen did not give way an inch, but the blonde peered languorously between them. "Did you want to see anyone?" she asked in a bored tone.

"Well, I did want to see Mr. Pendleton about buying a couple of hundred Whizbangos, but if you're too busy . . . "

"Oh, not at all. It's no trouble, really. Just a moment." She picked up a telephone and after a moment, said: "An op wants to see you about a couple hundred nickel robbers, Mike."

Johnny blinked and looked again at the blonde, "Tsk, tsk," he said.

The girl patted her permanent wave in a futile effort to improve it. "Through the door, to the right and yell for Mike."

"Who's Mike?" Johnny asked.

"Mike Pendleton, the sales manager. He'll take your money."

"Maybe," Johnny grunted. He pulled open a door and looked over an acre of desks. Mostly girls occupied the left side of the vast room, while the right had a majority of men. Most of the men wore their hats and smoked cigars.

On the extreme right was a railed enclosure, about forty by forty. It contained two or three desks and ten or twelve leather-covered armchairs and even two sofas. About twenty cuspidors were placed at strategic points.

Only one man was in the enclosure. He wore a derby hat pulled down so that the tops of his ears were flattened out. He was leaning back in a swivel chair with a pair of number twelve shoes propped up on his desk. A cigar stub was stuck in his mouth, but it was unlighted.

Mike Pendleton was bigger even than Andy or Angus.

Johnny drew in his breath and let it out: "Hey, Mike!" he roared.

Mike Pendleton yelled back: "Hiyah, pal. Over this way!"

Johnny found a gate in the chromium rail and pushed through it. Mike Pendleton removed his feet from his desk, got up and reaching out slapped Johnny on the shoulder.

"What'll you have, pal?" he boomed. Then he whacked Johnny again. Johnny had to grip Mike's desk to keep from being knocked to the floor.

He looked warily at the big fellow, ready to dodge the next

blow. "Why, I dunno," he said. "I thought maybe I'd like to see some of the Whizbangos. . . ."

"Sure, sure, in time, pal. But what'll you have to drink?" He slammed his fist on a chromium cupboard and a door swung open, revealing a row of bottles. "Scotch, rye, champagne — for the sissies — name your brand, pal. I got it."

"A Coca-Cola," Johnny said.

Mike Pendleton roared. "Jeez, pal, you kill me!" He raised his hand to buffet Johnny again, but the latter sprang back.

Mike scooped out a bottle of Scotch and a couple of water tumblers. He poured each about half full of whisky and thrust one of the glasses at Johnny.

"Down the hatch, pal, and I'll give you another for a chaser."

Mike tilted back his head, opened his mouth and dumped the whisky into the hole. Johnny watched, fascinated.

"Drink, pal," Mike cried. "Drink 'er down."

Johnny put the glass of whisky on Mike's desk. "I'm a teetotaler," he said primly. "I neither drink nor smoke. I'm a Baptist preacher. . . ."

"And you run a machine route?" gasped Mike.

"I preach to save souls," Johnny said, "and I operate slot machines to keep my own soul together."

"I'll be goddamed! Where you hail from, Preacher?"

"Alabama," Johnny said. "And please don't swear or I'll be compelled to take my business elsewhere."

"Boy, oh boy," said Mike. "Wait'll the old man and my brothers hear of this. No — they won't believe me. Damned if I'd believe them. Say, Preacher, how long you goin' to be in town?"

"Just long enough to purchase some games," replied Johnny. "I've got a nice little route back home, but I'm muscling in — I mean, I'm enlarging my territory and I need some new, up-to-date machines. Ah, some that you can regulate the pay-off."

"Hell, yes! You can fix our Whizbangos so they don't pay off at all or if you want to give the suckers a break — or maybe

have one of your shills pull a stunt — we can fix it so it'll pay off ninety per cent. That's the beauty of the Whizbango."

"You're sure the game can't be beaten? Some of our boys get awfully good on these pinball games."

"They won't get good with a Whizbango," declared Mike Pendleton. "Come on and I'll show you why."

Johnny backed away hastily as Mike came toward him, but the big fellow merely vaulted the railing and started for the rear of the office. Johnny followed at a safe distance.

Mike kicked open a thick oaken door and led the way into a room that was lined with Whizbangos. From a box he took a handful of slugs.

"All right, Reverend," he chuckled. "Watch how this works."

He put the slug into the coin chute, then pumped a steel ball into the release slot. He shot it out. The ball ricocheted from the feather spring and slipped neatly into one of the thousand mark slots.

From there it went down to the red spring, which it tapped lightly for another score of a thousand. By giving the machine a little body English Mike brought the ball back for a second tap against the red spring. It scored, but the ball flew violently sidewards from the impact.

"See!" exclaimed Mike. "Twice is all I could make it register on the red one. You know why? Look closely. All the other springs are absolutely round, but this one has an egg-shaped curve on top — and the curve is lopsided, just a little so you can hardly notice it, but enough to send that ball kicking to hell and gone."

"Interesting," murmured Johnny. "But still, I saw a fella nurse the ball right on that center marker for a score of twelve thousand with one ball."

"That musta been one of our old models," Mike declared. "We didn't get on to doctoring up that spring until a lot of the machines were out. All the new ones have the spring like that. Not bad, hey? Shall I put you down for a couple hundred?"

"Mmm, maybe. I want to look around a bit first, though."

"Sure, sure, Parson. How's the law down your way?"

"Why, we have a sheriff. . . ."

"Who hasn't? But does *your* sheriff live on his salary? You can't tell about the Bible belt."

"You mean, would our sheriff accept a bribe?"

"A little smear. 'Cause if he can be fixed up we got a nice line of one-armed bandits."

"One-armed bandits?"

"Cherry games to you. C'mon, I'll show you."

He pushed open another door and led Johnny Fletcher into a large room in which stood row upon row of "one-armed bandits." Mike grinned. "See? They ain't legal around here, but out West they pay off the mortgages with these. In Nevada they even put them in the hotel rooms."

Johnny's eyes lit up. "Show me how to hit the jackpot."

"Huh?" Mike looked at Johnny in surprise, then a broad grin spread over his face. "Okay, pal, I'll show you the simple way — but don't get caught pulling it where there're tough boys around."

He put a slug into the slot machine and pulled down the lever. The drums with the colored fruit pictures began whirling around merrily, then suddenly slammed to a stop. They registered a cherry, a lemon and a strip advertising a popular make of gum.

"You know what the percentages are in this of hitting the jackpot," Mike commented. "About one chance in umpteen billion. But you can get the small pay-offs pretty regular, so watch. . . ."

He put another slug in the machine and the drums whirled again. The pictures lined up for two cherries and a lemon. The machine began to whir, then gave a sharp click. At the exact instant of the click Mike slammed the machine a terrific blow with his fist.

Slugs by the dozen spewed out of the pay-off slot. Mike chuckled. "See? It was going to toss out two slugs . . . but I walloped it at just the right time, when the box was open and it

dumped out the whole batch. That's something we've never been able to figure out how to get around, but like I told you don't let any tough ops catch you doing that — and don't tell any of your customers about it, or you'll be robbing your own collection plates."

"Down in Alabama," said Johnny, "we get mostly Willkie buttons in the collection plate."

Mike Pendleton guffawed. "Preacher, you kill me! Say, look — you came to town for the convention, didn't you?"

"Convention? Why, uh, yes. . . ."

"Ain't you been there yet?"

"No. I thought I'd go there later. . . ."

"Hell, we'll go there right now. I wouldn't have stayed in the office at all if the old man hadn't made me. But now that I got a sucker — customer — come on, what're we waiting for?"

"Just a minute," snapped Johnny eluding the big fellow's grasp. "I'd rather get this business settled first. . . ."

"Pleasure before business!" chuckled Mike Pendleton. "You ain't seen nothin' if you ain't seen our convention. She's a humdinger. The boys in our convention like a convention 'at's a convention." He smacked his lips. "We got *everything.*"

Johnny shuddered convincingly. "You forget that I'm a minister of the gospel. . . ."

"I didn't forget it. Ho-ho! *You'll* like our convention. And will the boys like you. Ho-ho!"

He caught Johnny by surprise and gripped his arm in a huge hand. He propelled him through the reception room where he yelled at the receptionist, "Break it up, Doris."

As he was pulled through the outer door, Johnny murmured, "That's a rather attractive receptionist. . . ."

"Doris? Jeez, you *will* like our convention! Wait'll you see the mamas we got there. There's my jalopy. C'mon."

The jalopy was an imported car without a top. Every fender was dented. Mike pushed Johnny into the front seat, then ran around and climbed in behind the wheel.

"Two hundred Whizbangos, you said? Jeez!"

The car leaped from the curb, crumpled the left rear fender of a car that had been parked in front of it and hurtled out into the traffic. Johnny gripped his hat with both hands and slid lower in the seat.

The mad baby of the mad Pendletons roared: "Convention, here we come. Oh boy!"

He jerked the car around a corner on not more than two wheels and zoomed eastward, down a fairly deserted street. Which was probably the only reason Johnny survived that ride. If Mike Pendleton had gone all the way to Jefferson and Olive through heavy traffic they could not possibly have survived. The law of averages would have run out.

When they reached the big auditorium where the convention was being held, Johnny's knees were like rubber.

There was a gatekeeper at the door of the convention hall. He called, "Hello, Mr. Pendleton," and backed away swiftly to avoid Mike's slap on the back.

And then they were in the auditorium. It was a massive room lined with rows of exhibits, each exhibit in a booth enclosed by a wall or railing of some sort. Bunting and advertising banners made a riotous mass of color.

"C'mon, Deacon!" Mike Pendleton cried to Johnny. "Our exhibit's down there. . . ."

This was the time for Johnny to make his exit, but he had gone too far and was too intrigued by what was to come to back out, now. He trotted behind Mike Pendleton.

Suddenly he stopped, his eyes bulging. In a booth containing a battery of slot machines, a half-dozen girls were entertaining an equal number of fat, bald-headed men. Glasses clinked, liquor gurgled, the girls giggled. . . .

Johnny whistled in astonishment and Mike swiveled his head. "That's a cheap outfit, Parson," he said, "wait'll you see our layout up there! . . ."

Johnny followed. In the far corner was a double-sized booth,

floored with a heavy rug, furnished with modernistic chairs and divans and lined with pinball games. A mammoth party was in progress within the confines of the booth. There was even a colored waiter in white mess jacket serving the drinks.

There were eight girls in the party and almost three times that many men. All the girls were young and beautiful. Almost all of the men would have qualified for jobs as extras in a super-gangster motion picture.

"Hi, gang!" roared young Mike Pendleton. "How ya doin'?"

The "gang" swarmed around Mike. Mike pounded backs, jabbed stomachs and to climax his hearty good fellowship, put a reverse headlock on one of the men and slammed him to the floor.

Then he spied a girl, embraced her savagely and kissed her resoundingly on the mouth. The girl didn't seem to mind. When Mike released her, Johnny had a chance to observe her. She could have given Susan Webb a brassière and a shoulder strap and beaten her in a beauty contest.

She was quite tall, slender, yet filled out in the right places. Her hair was a golden blonde and shimmered. Her features were clean-cut, perhaps just a trifle too sharp. She had the poise and carriage of an actress.

"Mike, you devil!" she said, "Who's your friend?"

"My friend? Oh. . . ." Mike Pendleton's face broke into a huge grin. "Gang, this is Reverend — say, what *is* your name, pal?"

"Fletcher," Johnny murmured.

"Oh yeah, Reverend Fletcher, from Alabama. Listen, boys and gals, the reverend's a card. He saves souls for a living and runs slot machines to save his own soul. Catch on? Ha-ha-ha! He's an op on weekdays and a preacher on Sundays. Boy, is that rich? Ho-ho-ho!"

The anvil chorus took up the ha-ha's and ho-ho's and milled around Johnny. He glowered.

Then the girl kicked an ankle and slipped through. "Don't

mind Mike, Parson. He was hit on the head with a whisky bottle when he was a baby. What'd you say your name was — Fletcher?"

"Uh-huh."

"*John* Fletcher?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you told Mike you were a preacher?"

"Uh-huh. Who're you?"

"Nobody. Just Mike's sister. The name's Jill, if you're interested."

"And how! But you couldn't be Mike's sister. Or Andy's . . . or Angus'."

"I sometimes wonder about that myself. But Mom and Pop say it's so."

"Your mother must be a wonderful woman. I've met your father, too."

"So I've heard. Why'd you come here, then?"

Johnny grinned. "I didn't want to. Mike dragged me."

"Yes. I can imagine that. But you've carried the rib far enough. Don't you think you'd better duck while the ducking's good?"

"Hey, Reverend!" cried Mike, over several heads. "Here's a nice gal for you. Her name's Betty and she's got red hair."

"I like blondes," Johnny replied. "And this one'll do nicely."

"*Reverend* Fletcher," said Jill Pendleton.

"Mike's to blame for that. He tried to make me drink a quart of whisky and to get out of it, I told him the first thing that came into my mind, that I was a preacher."

"And why'd you go to see Mike in the first place? To pump him? By the way, do you know why Pop and Andy aren't here right now? They're out at that dog farm of yours. They're due back just about now — if they didn't have a fight. There probably wouldn't be, because they took Angus along, too . . . and it usually isn't worth while for anyone to pick a fight with the three of them. . . ."

"They may be surprised," Johnny murmured. "Sam Cragg's home."

"Cragg? Oh say . . . let's get out of this. I think I'd like to talk to you."

"And me, to you. Can we duck Mike?"

"We can try. . . . This way."

She took hold of his hand with her own, surprisingly strong hand and pulled him between a battery of pinball games. She lifted a length of bunting and stooping, stepped into the adjoining booth. When Johnny had followed she let the bunting fall into place.

She led him toward the front of the convention hall. "Outside will be safer. You got a car?"

"Not here. Mike wanted to turn my hair gray, so he forced me to ride with him."

She shuddered. "They took away his driver's license years ago. Let's get a cab. The joints are crummy in this neighborhood."

In the cab, Johnny said, "I'm a stranger here, you tell him where . . ."

"Capistrano's is a good place. No, that wouldn't be open this early. Driver, drop us at Grand and Washington. We'll find a place there."

She leaned back against the cushions and turned partly to face Johnny. She smiled. "Now, just what happened yesterday between you and Pop?"

"Nothing much. We had a little difference of opinion."

"Pop has a difference of opinion with everyone and doesn't fuss about it all evening. He was pretty worked up about a certain John Fletcher. . . ."

"Johnny to you, Jill. Young Andy got rough. My pal, Sam Cragg and me, got rough right back."

"Come clean. How many more were there?"

"That's all. Sam biffed young Andy, all by himself."

"I'd like to meet this Sam Cragg. But I don't believe it. I know my little brothers."

"I know Sam Cragg."

"How big is he? Eight feet tall and six feet wide?"

Johnny chuckled. "He's just about Andy's size, which is smaller than Angus and Mike."

"And a midget like him licked Andy?"

"For my money, you could throw in Angus and Mike."

"Don't be silly. Oh — here we are."

Johnny paid the driver and Jill Pendleton looked around. "There's a little place right up the street."

It was a long, narrow bar with high stools, but no booths. They sat on stools and Jill ordered a daiquiri. Johnny decided to have the same, although he wasn't sure how it would go before lunchtime.

"Now, then," Jill said, after she had sipped at the cocktail. "What's this feud between you and Cragg and the family?"

"We inherited it. My pal, Sam, did rather. His uncle put a wad of money into your family's business."

"Julius Cragg? That's right. So what's the trouble?"

"Did you ever meet Julius Cragg?"

"Yes. A very interesting gentleman — if you consider a curly wolf a gentleman."

Johnny chuckled. "Uncle Julius was kind to dumb animals. Ran a boarding house for dogs. St. Bernards. Each dog eats five pounds of meat a day. Sam Cragg inherited the hamburger bill. That's why he needs the dough his uncle put into your family's business."

"But it's been paid back!"

"Oh, so you're going to act like that."

"But it's true. Pop wouldn't lie to me about that."

"Wouldn't he?"

"Well . . . maybe he would. But I know the firm's been doing well these last six months."

"Only six months?"

"They brought out the Whizbango about that time. It was a hit."

"The game's no good," said Johnny. "Sam Cragg hit it for two dollars last night. The pay-off is they wouldn't pay off. That was out at the Calico Cat."

"You get around, Johnny Fletcher."

"I'm a traveling salesman. What do you know about Pete Suratt?"

"Nothing. I've never heard of him."

"He's a horse and hoof man from the Bronx. That reminds me, where can I buy a set of brass knuckles in this town?"

"Have you tried the Famous Leader? Or Grand-Barr?"

"Is that where your father buys his blackjacks?"

"Skip it," Jill Pendleton said. "You were at the convention; you saw the characters. They don't put slot machines in Y.M.C.A.'s."

Johnny grinned, then a little frown creased his forehead. "Mind if I make a telephone call?"

"Not at all, if I can listen in."

There was no phone booth in the cafe, but there was a telephone underneath the bar, which the bartender brought up for Johnny to use.

He called the dog farm. Sam Cragg answered the phone. "Johnny!" he cried. "Where are you? I've been trying to get you all morning. I called the police station, even the mor — "

"What's up?" Johnny interrupted.

"Plenty. You know that dog, Oscar, that was poisoned? Well, I started to bury him and took off his collar. Cripes, there was a zipper pocket under the collar. . . ."

"I'll be damned!" Johnny exclaimed. "What was in it?"

"Can you talk? I mean, is it all right to tell you over the phone? . . . There was a promissory note in the dog collar for fifty grand. Made out to Uncle Julius, by Andrew Pendleton. Can you beat it! Uncle Julius did own the business. . . ."

"Not quite," said Johnny, "but that's very interesting. Uh . . .

anything else happen out there this morning?"

"Nah. A gang of the Pendletons were here just before I found the note, but I wasn't in the mood for them, so I shooed them off the place — with a shotgun I found around. Oh — the banker came out. . . ."

"Never mind him. Anyone else?"

"The girl across the road. Her and Georgie were in a huddle for a long time."

"That's not interesting. Well, look, Sammy, take good care of — that thing. I'll be home in an hour. So long!"

He hung up and the bartender said: "That was a fifteen cent call, Mister."

Johnny dropped a bill on the bar. "Take it out of this, and the drinks too."

"We're going?" asked Jill Pendleton.

Johnny grinned. "Uh-huh. Your old man told a fib . . . about that money Uncle Julius loaned him. It wasn't paid back."

Jill's beautiful eyes clouded. "Are you sure? I'm positive I heard Dad say everything was paid off."

"Sam Cragg found the note."

"I see. Was there . . . trouble?"

"No, he didn't find the note until your family had left. They went peaceably."

They left the café and on the sidewalk Jill held out her hand to him. "Will I see you again?"

"You will. Here's a cab. You take that back to the convention hall and I'll get another and pick up my car near the factory."

Johnny waited until Jill Pendleton's cab had pulled away, then signaled for another and climbed in. "Kingshighway," he told the driver. "Away up; I'll tell you when we get there."

Ten minutes later, he said, "It's in the next block."

"Then you better get out here," said the cab driver. "Looks like there's been an accident in the next block. Traffic's blocked."

Johnny climbed out and paid the meter charge. In the act of

adding a tip he looked to the right and gasped. Then he broke into a run for the scene of the accident.

He had a hard time breaking through the throng that surrounded it, but when he finally succeeded he saw that it was the station wagon all right. And the other car was Mike Pendleton's foreign jalopy. This time it was a complete wreck . . . but so was the station wagon.

Mike Pendleton was explaining it naïvely to a policeman. "See, I'm pulling in here to park my buggy, when this guy pops out on my right where he ain't got no business being and smacks me. Then he jumps out and beats it, see? I'm going to sue him for fifty thousand smackers."

"That isn't true, Officer," cried a bystander. "I saw the whole thing. This man was coming along at seventy miles an hour, driving like a maniac, then all of a sudden he swerved in to the curb and put on the brakes. His car skidded right into the station wagon which was parked here, legally. There wasn't even anyone in it."

"You calling me a liar, Mister?" Mike Pendleton challenged. "If you are I'll mop up the street with you, then throw you in the garbage can."

The witness looked at Mike Pendleton's scowling face and backed away. The traffic officer said, worriedly. "Now, look, Mr. Pendleton, I'm not doubting your word, but you've been in several accidents lately and if the owner of this car makes a complaint. . . ."

"Let him complain," cried Mike. "Where is he, if he's so honest? I ask you, where is he? . . . " He waved his arms dramatically and then caught sight of Johnny Fletcher.

"Reverend! Say, tell this dope — I mean this cop — you were with me in the car. Tell him how it happened. Go ahead."

Johnny Fletcher looked at the wrecked station wagon. The Missouri license plate had, by some odd quirk, been slammed into the radiator and was as conspicuous as the wart on the chin of the Duchess of Windsor.

He shuddered. "He's telling the truth, Officer."

The policeman sighed in relief. "Is that so, Reverend? Mind giving me your name — just for my report?"

"John Fletcher."

"*Reverend* John Fletcher," Mike Pendleton amplified. "Put down that reverend, Officer."

Mike lunged forward suddenly and caught Johnny's arm. "Come on, pal. We didn't finish our business."

Johnny tried to draw away from Mike, but the young giant chuckled and sunk his steely fingers into Johnny's biceps. "You don't get away until I get your John Henry down on the old dotted line. You coming quietly, or must I get rough?"

There was no use resisting. Mike had already pulled Johnny through the crowd and was hustling him into the Pendleton building. He didn't let go of him until he had him beyond the reception room. Then he slapped Johnny so hard on the back that Johnny's knees buckled.

"What was the idea of dragging off my sister? And where is she now?"

"She went back to the convention hall. And I didn't drag her off. She asked me to buy her a drink."

"Jill? Hell, she must like you, Parson. A preacher, jeez! All right, now, I'll put you down for two hundred Whizbangos. And how many of the one-armed bandits?"

"Just a few," Johnny said, weakly. "Ten or twelve."

"I'll put you down for twenty. You get them for one twenty apiece. And two hundred Whizbangos at seventy-two fifty. Umm, that's a grand total of sixteen-nine. Dig down, Parson. Bring out the old poke."

Johnny shivered. "I didn't bring that much money with me. You'll have to send them C.O.D."

"Stop right there! We don't go for the C.O.D. routine, see? You're probably in cahoots with your local express agent. The least I'll take is a certified check."

"I haven't got one with me."

Mike Pendleton scowled. "You didn't come all the way up here without *some* money? I'll take a deposit. Let's see . . ." He began slapping Johnny's pockets. Johnny tried to back away, but Mike crowded him against the wall.

In desperation, Johnny cried: "The money's at my hotel — the Coronet. I don't want to place an order until I've looked around —."

"You've looked far enough," snapped Mike. "Think I'm going to let those wolves at the convention get hold of you and sell you a bunch of crap? When we got all these Whizbangos and bandits in stock? C'mon, we'll go to your hotel."

"Your car's smashed up," Johnny protested.

"So what? They still run hacks in St. Looie."

So they left the building and at the curb Mike shoved Johnny into a too-convenient taxi. "The Coronet," Mike roared. "And don't spare the horses."

He leaned back and looked fondly at Johnny. "Reverend, I like you and you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to take you home to dinner with me. Andy and Angus and the old man'll go nuts about you. And Jill — say, ain't she a pip? Even if she is my sister!"

Johnny agreed to that, but he looked uneasily out of the cab window as they turned into Lindell Boulevard. In a few minutes they would be at the Coronet Hotel. Then the fireworks would start.

"Yep," Mike continued, "Jill musta took a liking to you to ask you to buy her a drink. Which reminds me, I thought you said you didn't drink?"

"Could I refuse a girl like Jill?"

"No, of course not." Mike smacked his lips. "For a preacher you're damn broad-minded. Ho-ho-ho! That's funnier every time I think of it — You save souls on Sundays and on weekdays you run slot machines to save your own soul. You kill me, Reverend!"

The cab suddenly swung across traffic and turned into a curved

driveway. The driver slammed on the brakes and a doorman reached forward and pulled open the door.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said courteously.

Mike Pendleton crowded ahead of Johnny. He flung a bill at the driver and gripped Johnny's arm as he alighted from the cab. "Here we are, pal. Now we can close our little deal, eh?" He squeezed Johnny's arm and the latter knew that he would have bruises on the arm for weeks afterwards.

There was no escape. Johnny allowed himself to be led into the lobby and up to the desk. His frantic eyes searched the key slots.

"Key for 1444," he gulped.

The clerk took the key from the slot and slid it across the counter. Mike Pendleton propelled Johnny to the elevators. "You travel in style, Parson," he commented, his eyes darting about the luxuriously furnished lobby.

Johnny wondered how much longer he could stall Mike. The thought of what would happen to him if everything failed him and he had to admit his identity sent a shudder through him.

Room 1444 was near the elevators. As he stooped to poke the key into the lock, Johnny shot a glance up the hall, hoping that the staircase would be near by. He failed to see it, however, and with a resigned inhalation of breath opened the door of Room 1444.

Mike crowded him into the room and almost instantly exclaimed. "Hey, Parson, what the! . . ." A piece of flesh-colored wearing apparel was draped across a chair.

Johnny flushed. "Uh, that's what I've been trying to tell you. You see, it isn't what you . . ."

"You sly dog!" roared Mike. "A preacher and you've got a woman in your hotel room. Hey! And then you make passes at my sister. I don't like that. Not where Jill's concerned. . . ."

"You don't understand," Johnny protested. "Let me explain — "

"Explain nothing, you sanctimonious hypocrite. I'll send you back to Alabama with — "

Whatever it was he intended to send Johnny back to Alabama with, Mike Pendleton never told, for at that moment the door through which they had just entered was pushed open and a woman bleated.

Johnny whirled. The woman was tall and thin and if she hadn't been a school teacher for at least twenty years, Johnny was a St. Bernard's uncle.

The woman cried shrilly: "What are you doing in my room, you beasts?"

"Excuse me," Johnny said desperately. "It was — him!"

He jerked his thumb at Mike Pendleton, then made a frantic leap for the door. The school teacher tried to block him, but Johnny shoved her desperately to one side. He hurtled out into the hallway and in two bounds reached the elevators — just as the door of one was closing.

He lost a piece of skin getting in, but once in he was safe. Except for the elevator operator. The boy looked suspiciously at him. "What's up?"

"My wife!" Johnny gulped. "She . . ."

The boy chuckled. "She caught you with another dame, eh?"

Johnny gave the boy a dollar bill and pressed his forefinger against his lips.

It wasn't until he was in a taxicab hurtling through Forest Park that he stopped shivering. And then, suddenly, a chuckle rippled through him.

"I wonder how Mike's making out."

Thirty minutes later the cab stopped before the Cragg Dog Farm. As he paid the tariff Johnny noted that the sheriff's limousine was gone. In its place was a small coupé. Mr. August Kunkel of the First National Bank of Deming popped out.

"Mr. Fletcher! I want to see you about that check. I must have it."

"What check?"

"The check for ten thousand dollars that you were going to deposit to Mr. Cragg's account."

"Oh, that," said Johnny. "I changed my mind about that. I don't like the way some of your local people are acting and I may advise Cragg to just let them go ahead and see what they can do. . . ."

"But, Mr. Fletcher!" cried August Kunkel, in consternation. "You've *got* to give me that check. I — I practically guaranteed the payment of some large bills. . . ."

"What'd you do that for?"

"Why, why, what could I do?" Kunkel floundered. "These stores called up and asked if your credit was good."

"*My* credit?"

"No, Mr. Cragg's."

"And what'd you tell them?"

"I told them yes, of course. I was counting on that check."

"That was decent of you. I appreciate it, old man."

"But it's not true. Without that check, I can't guarantee any bills."

"Well, don't then. Cragg'll work it out."

"But I understood you were handling the financial end of things out here."

"I'm giving Cragg a hand, that's all. But I'm getting mighty tired of the business people in Deming. We may take our business elsewhere."

Kunkel groaned. "But what about that money I've obligated myself for? Three hundred dollars. . . ."

"That's tough, old man. But you shouldn't have done it."

"But they said you told them to call me."

"Me? Ridiculous. We ordered a few pounds of meat. Naturally we expect to be billed for it and on the first of the month when we generally pay our bills, they'll be taken care of. The new bills. The old ones, those held by the disgruntled fellow citizens of yours — they're suing. They'll whistle for their money."

August Kunkel stared at Johnny Fletcher. Then he shook his head and turning, went back to his coupé. Before he climbed in, he called over his shoulder:

"I don't like this, Mr. Fletcher. And I don't think you've heard the last of it."

"Come and see us any time, Mr. Kunkel," Johnny said cheerfully. "Maybe we can sell you a dog, a nice, housebroken pet — "

Mr. Kunkel ground his starter and slammed his gearshift into reverse.

Johnny went toward the house. Sam Cragg, who had been peeking through a crack in the door, opened it wide and stepped out.

"I heard, Johnny. We're sunk now."

"Not yet. We've got enough meat for today — tomorrow, too, if we stretch it. I figure this business will be cleared up by them. Where's the note?"

Sam brought it out. Johnny scrutinized it carefully. It was an "On Demand" note, dated a year and a half ago. It was signed by Andrew Pendleton, as president of the Pendleton Novelty Company.

"Well, Sam," said Johnny. "This looks like we're in the pinball business."

"From what I've seen of it, it don't sound any better than the dog business."

"You haven't seen all of it. Their conventions, for example. I was at one, this morning. Mike Pendleton took me. Did you know that there's a Pendleton girl?"

Sam sniffed. "What's she look like, that she-gorilla, Maggie?"

Johnny pursed up his lips. "N-no. I wouldn't say that. But you've seen the rest of the Pendletons. See if you can visualize what Jill looks like."

"Jill?"

"That's her name."

Sam looked suspiciously at Johnny. "Have you talked to her? That Jill stuff sounds like you know her."

"I bought her a drink. . . . Where's Georgie Porgie?"

"He was around here somewhere. I've had the devil of a time making him do any work."

"Shh!" said Johnny. "I think I know where to find him."

He opened the kitchen door, quietly, nodded to Mrs. Binns and tiptoed to the door of the living room. Cigarette smoke wafted into his nostrils.

"Hello, Georgie," Johnny said softly.

Georgie sprang up from the couch on which he was sprawled, started toward the door, then whirled and headed for the front door.

"Wait a minute, Georgie!" Johnny cried.

Georgie stopped at the door, but his hand remained near the knob. "Cut out the rough stuff, Fletcher," he sneered.

"Rough stuff? I just want to talk to you. Where do you get the money to buy all those cigarettes you smoke, Georgie?"

The boy's eyes narrowed. "What's the idea, Fletcher?"

"Just curious, Georgie. The rest of us haven't got the price of a dog biscuit, but you seem pretty well heeled. You can buy cigarettes, go to night clubs and drink champagne. . . ."

"What of it? I didn't say I was broke, did I?"

"N-no, you didn't. But, Sam — "

Sam hurtled down the hall and caught Georgie before the latter could quite get the front door open. Georgie snarled and kicked furiously, but Sam wrapped a muscular arm about him, pinning his arms to his sides.

"Be still, punk, or I'll slap you," he growled.

Georgie didn't subside altogether, but he confined his struggles to mere squirming. Johnny came up casually and ducked his head, for it seemed as if Georgie would spit at him.

But Georgie contented himself with name calling, which required no handkerchiefs. "Let me go, you stupid oxen. You've got no right to treat me like this. You! . . ."

Johnny playfully slapped Georgie's pockets. He found eight dollars in small bills and silver in his trousers pockets, but in his inside breast pocket he made a real discovery. A fat wallet.

Johnny slipped out a thick sheaf of bills and whispered. "Folding money, Sam, big folding money."

"And he let us starve, the punk!"

Johnny counted the money. "A hundred and eighty-eight dollars altogether. My, my. Georgie, we sure appreciate the loan of this spinach."

"Loan!" howled Georgie. "I'm not lending you that money. You're stealing it from me. I'll have you pinched. . . ."

"That's all right, Georgie," Johnny went on. "I'll do the same for you some day. It *is* decent of him to *lend* us the money, isn't it, Sammy?"

"Uh-huh!" chuckled Sam.

He released Georgie. The boy sprang away a few feet and then faced them, crouched like a cat about to be attacked by a couple of . . . St. Bernards.

"That's my money, Fletcher. Give it back, or you'll be sorry."

"If I gave it back, I'd be sorry. We need it. By the way, where'd you get all this dough?"

"Uncle Julius gave it to me. It's my money!"

"I don't want to speak ill of the dead," said Johnny, "but if Julius Cragg gave you this much money he was twice as dumb as I thought he was . . . at first."

Georgie Tompkins suddenly whirled and rushed down the hall toward the kitchen. Johnny heard the door slam as he hurtled out of the house. He started for the living room.

"Imagine Georgie holding out on us like that! Buying champagne while we had to drink beer."

"You s'pose he really got that money from my uncle?"

"Oh sure. But I don't think Julius *handed* him the money. Georgie was the first to get to Julius after he was shot, wasn't he?"

"He frisked him?"

"Julius was a bookie. Bookies carry a lot of cash on them."

Sam gnawed at his lower lip with his strong, white teeth. "What's the score now, Johnny? You got any idea who knocked off my uncle?"

"I wish I knew *why* he was killed. The thing's driving me crazy. I can't figure out a motive. Look, Jim Webb was sore at Julius. About the dogs, we thought, but turns out it was mostly on account of Julius was spoiling a nice deal by wanting too much split. I don't think Webb killed him. He didn't know about heirs and anyway, he couldn't have risked the delay. The airplane company would go elsewhere if they couldn't get quick action. Say . . . that reminds me; I was going to give this airplane company a sales talk myself. I'll just give them a ring right now."

He got the telephone directory and discovered that the general offices of the Trans-American Airways were on Twelfth Street in St. Louis. He got the number and asked for the general manager.

"Tell him it's about that airport deal in Deming," he told the switchboard operator.

It took quite a while to get the general manager and then his first words stunned Johnny. "Sorry, but we're no longer interested."

"What?" exclaimed Johnny. "You need an airport, don't you? Where else could you get a better place than this?"

"Plenty of places. We've purchased a site closer to the city. . . ."

"Purchased? When? . . ."

"Oh, several days ago. Sorry. . . ." The phone clicked as the general manager of the airplane company hung up.

Johnny stared at the phone a moment, before hanging up. "I'll be damned. This deal's been cold for days. Now, why do you suppose? . . ."

"Listen to that, Johnny!" cried Sam. "The dogs . . ."

Johnny shook his head to clear away the haze from his brain.

Then he heard the dogs. They were making as much racket as they had the first night of their arrival.

He swore. "That punk! He's gone out and stirred up the dogs."

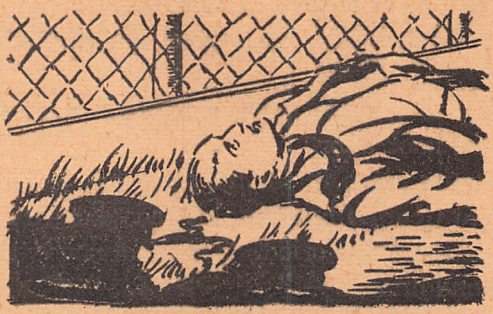
"He's going to get his pants warmed," Sam said grimly, heading for the back door.

He didn't quite reach it, for the door was jerked open from the outside and Georgie burst in, his face distorted with terror.

"Cragg! Fletcher!" he cried. "There's a dead man out in the kennels. I found him. I — "

Johnny didn't hear the rest. He was hurtling past Georgie to the yard. He crossed it at Olympic record speed and tore open the near door of the long kennel building.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE din of the barking, snarling, howling dogs was terrific and Johnny stopped and looked around in bewilderment. Then he saw the huddle of clothing at the far end of the runway.

He ran toward it, quickening his steps as he approached. Then suddenly he came to a dead halt. The man's face was turned toward him. Johnny looked at the immobile features, the wide-open mouth and the staring eyes and recognized the dead man.

It was Gerald Potts, the attorney!

Behind him heavy feet pounded the runway. Sam Cragg cried, "Who is it, Johnny?"

Johnny turned. "Potts, the lawyer."

"Potts! For the love of Mike. How'd he get here?"

Johnny's eyes widened. "Yes, how did he get here? There's no car outside. When were you in here the last time?"

Sam rubbed his chin with the back of a huge hand. "What time's it now?"

Johnny looked at his watch. "A few minutes after twelve. I've been back since a little after eleven thirty."

"Well, it was at least an hour before then since I'd been out here. I was dodging that banker and for a while before that I'd gone in to rest up. . . ."

Johnny snorted. "Rest! When did the Pendletons leave?"

"Oh, they were here early. They must have left about ten o'clock."

"When did you bury the dog?"

Sam winced. "I didn't bury him. He's over there in that big box. I was going to and then I found that collar. . . ."

"What time was that?"

"I dunno, just a couple of minutes after the Pendletons left. Maybe five or ten."

"Was Georgie here then?"

"No, I'd sent him out with a shovel to dig a hole. I didn't tell him about the note."

It's just as well. What'd you do after finding the note?"

"I went to the house and called you."

Johnny snorted. "You dope, *I* called you. You wouldn't have known where to reach me."

"That's right. You called me. That was about a half hour after I found the note in the dog collar."

Johnny showed his teeth in a snarl. "What a lawyer wouldn't do to you on the witness stand! I got home at eleven thirty. You were dodging the banker for an hour, that's ten thirty. Another half hour — "

"You're confusing me, Johnny," Sam interrupted. "Let me tell it my way. At ten o'clock the Pendletons left. At ten minutes after, I found the dog collar. You telephoned about ten thirty. Kunkel was already here, then, sitting out in his car. He came before you phoned, only I wouldn't talk to him. That's why I stayed in the house and got to answer your call."

"Just when did Kunkel come out here?"

About quarter after ten. Right after I found the dog collar. . . ."

"Wait a minute!" cried Johnny. "You found the note in the dog collar at ten minutes after ten. Where were you when you took the collar off?"

"In the dog shed. The cops'd put the dog there last night."

A gleam came into Johnny's eyes. "By the way, where were the sheriff and deputies while all this was going on?"

"Oh they'd gone early. They snooped around a while, then one of them came back in the limousine, all excited and the whole gang of them piled in and beat it. That was even before the Pendletons came out."

"Sam," said Johnny, "think hard now. Potts came out here between the time you found the dog collar and went into the house and the time Kunkel came out — a period of between five and ten minutes, if you haven't got it mixed up. Exactly what did you do during those, let's say, ten minutes?"

"Nothing. I came into the house. I remember I was going to call you up and got the telephone book and then I couldn't think where you might be. Then the doorbell rang and it was Kunkel."

"Did *you* answer the door?"

Sam wrinkled his face wryly. "No, I was afraid it was another summons server. I had Mrs. Binns answer the door. I ducked upstairs."

"You and Mrs. Binns were the only ones in the house? Where was Georgie?"

"Digging the hole for the dog, I guess. I didn't hear him come in. I stayed upstairs, peeking out of the window until you telephoned. Then I went upstairs again."

"And no other car came up to the place during that time? None went away?"

"Not that I know of. I didn't hear any — or see any."

Johnny shook his head, perplexed. And then he heard noise outside the dog kennels — the dogs had quieted down considerably in the few minutes he and Sam had been inside.

The door at the far end opened and men swarmed in.

"What's going on here?" Sheriff Lindstrom roared.

He pounded down the runway, followed by his horde of deputies.

Johnny winced. "That's quick work!"

"Georgie called them," growled Sam.

One or two of the deputies even had guns in their hands.

"It's Mr. Potts!" cried Lindstrom. He brushed past Johnny and dropped to his knees to examine the dead man. "His head's been bashed in," he added.

The sheriff got to his feet and glowered at Johnny. "This is getting to be too much of a habit around here."

"You're telling me," Johnny said witheringly.

At the distant door Georgie Tompkins poked his head in timidly. He pulled it away again and James Webb came storming into the kennels.

"What's this, another murder?"

"It isn't a clam bake," Johnny retorted.

"Still wisecracking," Sheriff Lindstrom said. "I think you've said — and done — about enough around this place, Fletcher. What's it all about?"

"How should I know? My friend, Sam Cragg, inherited this farm only a couple of days ago. He came here, with the full expectation of finding a nice, quiet place. And he walks into this."

"This *was* a nice quiet place — before he got here."

"Oh, was it? His uncle died of hardening of the arteries, I suppose?"

Sheriff Lindstrom grimaced. "That was a month ago. Nothing happened since then, until you fellows showed up."

"You think our showing up started things, Sheriff? You're right — I think! But why?"

"How do I know what's behind all this?"

"I'll tell you. Potts here, came out to the place, the first evening we got here — inside of a half hour after we arrived. He got Sam to sign some papers, turning over the property. He was in pretty much of a hurry about it all."

"Why was he in such a hurry?"

"I don't know. I do know that he forgot to tell us some things that seemed pretty important. For example, that Mr. Webb had been trying to get Julius Cragg in on a real-estate deal . . . "

"I'll speak for myself," James Webb snapped. "It's no secret that Cragg and I weren't overly fond of each other. He had no right to bring such a flock of dogs here, to keep neighbors awake all night. I maintain they constitute a public nuisance. . . ."

"Chickens are a public nuisance, then," Johnny said. "But I haven't heard of any farmers being arrested for raising them."

"This is residential property."

"It's outside the town limits. But if it *is* residential property, Mr. Webb, how come you tried to sell your place and this for an airport? . . ."

Webb clenched his jaws. "That deal's off, Fletcher. You may as well know. You've no chance of selling this place, now."

"Uh-huh, I know. The deal's been off . . . about a week. The T.A.A. bought a site that long ago. Did you know that, Mr. Webb?"

"I didn't know until this morning. I hadn't kept in touch with them."

"But suppose if we'd taken up your offer last night, what then?"

"I'd have checked before definitely closing it."

"Oh, you would?"

"Listen," said Sheriff Lindstrom. "Let me do some talking. I'm not interested in private business details. A murder's been committed here, two murders. . . ."

"Three," corrected Johnny. "Mustn't forget about Julius."

"I haven't forgotten him. But that was a month ago. This is now. It's my idea, whoever killed Julius Cragg killed Arthur Binns and Mr. Potts. Now, look, Fletcher, let me do some talking for a change. The boy Tompkins found the body, did he?"

Johnny nodded toward Georgie, who was standing at the fringe of the crowd, a sickly expression on his face. The sheriff turned.

"That right, son?"

Georgie bobbed his head up and down. "Yes," he whispered.

"What time was that?"

"Just before I telephoned you. I ran from here into the house, told Fletcher and Cragg and rushed to the telephone."

"That was at twenty-two minutes after twelve. I looked at the clock when the call came in. Doc," to a man who had come around and was kneeling by the body, "how long would you say he was dead?"

"Can't say, without an autopsy. Not close, I can't say. But from the condition of the body and the congealed blood, I'd guess quite a while."

"Fifteen minutes? A half hour?"

"Two hours?" Johnny guessed.

The doctor shrugged. "Hard to say. I'll have to give the body a complete examination. However, the rigor has set in."

"Does it set in that quick?"

"Sometimes, not always. After the autopsy I'll be able to give you a much more definite answer."

"That's fine, Doc," said the sheriff. "All right now, Tompkins, how'd you happen to come in here when you did?"

Georgie's upper lip curled as he glanced at Johnny. "They chased me out of the house."

"Chased you?"

Johnny thought of the money he had taken from Georgie Tompkins and expected the boy to blurt it out. But he didn't. He said, instead:

"They made me take over Binns' job. I came out to feed the dogs and then I found this . . . like that!"

"Hadn't you been in before today?"

"Oh yes, several times. I was working out here when you were here early this morning."

The sheriff nodded. "That's right, I remember seeing you. You and Cragg. By the way, Fletcher? Where'd you go to this morning?"

"Downtown. To attend the slot-machine manufacturers' convention."

"Eh? Are you in the slot-machine business?"

"Julius Cragg was."

"I never knew that."

"Lots of things you didn't know about Cragg, Sheriff. You didn't know that he was a bookmaker."

The sheriff cleared his throat noisily. "When'd you get back from that convention?"

"Right around eleven thirty. At that time, Mr. August Kunkel — yes, the banker — was sitting outside in his car. We talked for a moment about business and then Sam Cragg came out of the house and I went inside with him. We were still there when Georgie came in, yelling about this — "

"Is that right, Tompkins? I won't ask Cragg, because Fletcher and him are too thick."

Georgie nodded. "That's right . . . I guess. I didn't hear him come up, but he didn't go out of the house after he once came in."

"What about Cragg?" the sheriff asked Georgie.

"I don't know. He was round and about all morning."

"I can talk," Sam growled.

"Go ahead, then. Give me a timetable of what you did this morning . . . from the time we left."

Sam held up his left hand, fingers outstretched. With his right index finger he bent down his left thumb.

"You left here at nine thirty. Ten minutes later a bunch of men named Pendleton came out here. . . ."

"What're you talking about — a bunch of men named Pendleton?"

"That's what I said. The whole family. Old Man Pendleton and two sons. They own the Pendleton slot-machine company. They jawed until right around ten, then me and Georgie decided to dig a hole and bury the dog that was poisoned last night."

"*I* dug the hole," Georgie interrupted bitterly. "I don't know what you were doing during that time."

"What were you doing, Cragg?" Lindstrom asked.

"It was ten o'clock when we started. I mean, when Georgie started digging. I came in here and took off the dog's collar — " He stopped and shot a quick glance at Johnny.

Johnny stared stonily at Sam Cragg. The sheriff intercepted Sam's glance. "Why'd you take the collar off the dog?"

"Uh, because it was a good collar. After all, we can't buy collars for all the dogs around here. Like I was saying, I took the collar off the dog and went into the house. Then the banker rang the doorbell and I ducked upstairs."

"What for?"

Sam gave Johnny an appealing look. Johnny answered. "Because he doesn't like bankers. He's allergic to them."

Sheriff Lindstrom grunted. "He can talk for himself. How long did you stay upstairs?"

"Until he left."

"Just a minute or two?"

Sam swallowed hard and again Johnny answered for him. "Kunkel stayed here more than an hour. He remained in his car outside from a quarter after ten until eleven thirty."

"Kunkel waited here an hour and a quarter?" exclaimed the sheriff. "For you?"

"Yes."

"What for? Kunkel generally keeps people waiting. I never heard of him waiting an hour for anyone."

"This was business."

"What kind of business?"

"Personal business. It had nothing to do with this."

"You sure?"

"I'm quite sure."

The sheriff scowled. "It must have been darn important, then, and I can't imagine anything that would be important enough —

Say . . ." A startled look leaped into his eyes. "You say Kunkel came here right after you went into the house, Cragg? And stayed here until Fletcher got back?"

"Ah," said Johnny. "Now, you're getting warm. I figured that out before you came. Sam found the — took the dog collar off the dead dog and went into the house at approximately ten minutes after ten. He was inside between five and ten minutes — five at least and ten at the outside — before Kunkel got here. . . ."

"Then Mr. Potts must've been killed between that time. . . ." The sheriff stared in amazement for an instant, then suspicion again leaped into his eyes. "That is, if you're telling the truth, Cragg."

"You sayin' I'm not?" Sam demanded truculently.

Outside the dog kennels an automobile horn tooted insistently. The dogs, who had become quiet, began growling again. Before they could get up full concerto, however, the door of the kennels was opened and immediately blocked by a vast body.

Andrew Pendleton.

"Hey, Fletcher!" he yelled.

"Come in, Andy," Johnny called back. "Bring the family along."

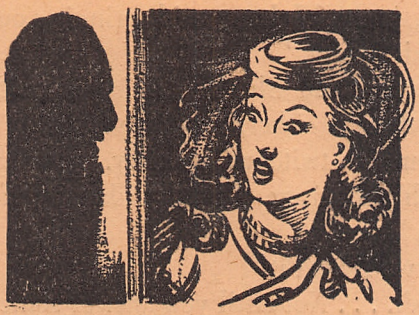
Angus Pendleton and Andy Senior were already crowding Andy Junior into the runway. They stopped just inside the door.

"Didn't know you had company," Andy Junior said loudly.

"Oh, that's all right. Come on up, we've got a dead man here. Maybe you know him."

"A dead man!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE PENDLETONS came forward at a run, the old man crowding ahead of Andy so that he was in the lead. The sheriff and his men gave way, so that the newcomers could see the body of Potts, the lawyer.

"Why, it's Jerry Potts," said Andy Pendleton Senior. "So he finally got what was coming to him?"

"What's that?" Sheriff Lindstrom bristled.

"You heard me," Pendleton Senior replied. "He was a slick lawyer. I don't like tame lawyers and I hate slick ones twice as much. Potts was Julius Cragg's mouthpiece."

"That's right, Mr. Pendleton," Johnny said quickly. "He handled the details of that loan Julius made to you."

The white-haired old scoundrel's eyes snapped. "I paid back that money."

"Did you? Then why do you keep running out here? Don't you think I'll believe it?"

"I don't believe anything connected with slick lawyers," Pendleton snarled. "Potts was too damn slick for his own good. He deserved what he got. That's all. Come on, boys!"

"Whoa!" cried Sheriff Lindstrom. "You're not going to leave now. Not after those remarks?"

"Who's going to keep me here?"

"Yeah," chimed in Andy Junior. "Who's going to keep us here, if we want to go?"

"The sheriff, Andy," Johnny said, grinning out of the side of his mouth. "This is him."

The Pendletons fixed Sheriff Lindstrom with black looks. "We don't like sheriffs either," said the father of the tribe.

Lindstrom's mouth twitched uneasily. But sight of his many assistants gave him courage. "I don't like any of you fellows. I don't like you a bit — "

"Swell, then we'll beat it!"

"No you won't. . . . Not until you answer some questions."

"Then ask them and get it over with!" snapped Pendleton Senior. "We're busy men."

"You're the men were out here this morning," the sheriff began. "What did you want out here?"

"Didn't Fletcher tell you? Then he must have figured it was none of your business. Which it isn't."

"It *is* my business. Anything that happened out here today is my business. What time did you leave here?"

"Ten o'clock. When was Potts knocked off?"

Lindstrom waved a hand impatiently. "You're sure none of you came back after you left?"

"Yes," replied Angus, the night-club owner. "We came back, just now. Didn't you know?"

Lindstrom flushed. "I meant between ten o'clock and now. As near as we can figure out, Mr. Potts was killed around a quarter after ten."

"We were halfway back to St. Louis by then," said the eldest Pendleton. "Which lets us out. Goodbye! . . ."

He turned and started marching off. Sheriff Lindstrom opened his mouth to call them back, then closed it and looked balefully at Sam Cragg. "You gave them an alibi, yourself."

Sam scratched his head. "I said they left at ten o'clock. I didn't say they couldn't have come back."

"You did, you said you didn't see any car come up before Mr. Kunkel arrived."

"He was in the house, he couldn't have seen a car," Johnny said.

"He could have heard one!" Lindstrom snapped.

Johnny shrugged. "You're the boss, Sheriff. And now, if you don't mind — it's past our lunchtime."

The sheriff shuddered. "You'd eat? After this?"

"Why not? I can't go until evening without eating. Any objections?"

There were none, so Johnny walked firmly toward the door at the far end of the kennels. Sam Cragg came behind him, then a few feet behind Sam, Georgie Tompkins.

When they got into the house, Susan Webb was sitting in the living room.

"What's happened?" she cried, springing to her feet. "Why would anyone want to kill Mr. Potts?"

"How do you know Potts was killed?" Johnny asked quickly.

Susan's eyes went involuntarily to Georgie. The boy's nostrils flared. "I telephoned her . . . after I called the sheriff. It's Potts all right, Susie."

Susan sat down suddenly. "What's happening here? I don't understand it. Last night — and now!"

"There's a murderer running around loose," Johnny said grimly. "A three-time murderer. And they can't hang a murderer any deader for four murders than three — "

"Four?" gasped Susan. "Who? . . ."

"I don't know. I don't even know if there'll be another. But when an epidemic's started you don't know when it'll stop. I don't like it."

"Johnny," said Sam Cragg, "let's drop the whole thing and clear out of here."

"We'll clear out, after I bring down this killer."

Sam started to protest further, but saw the determination on

Johnny's face and desisted. "What's for lunch?" he asked.

"Lunch!" cried Susan Webb. She threw her hands over her face, got up and ran to the front door. Georgie Tompkins went after her.

When the door had slammed, Sam asked in surprise, "What do you suppose was the matter with her? I only wondered out loud what we were having for lunch."

"Hamburger, Sam," Johnny replied savagely. "And we're having it for dinner tonight. And breakfast tomorrow. Hamburger and more hamburger."

But there was no lunch. Utensils were on the stove in the kitchen, but the food had not been cooked. Mrs. Binns was not in the kitchen. She was up in her room. She had heard.

Johnny sighed wearily. He was pretty sick of it himself. He returned to the living room and dropped into an armchair. Sam Cragg came in and paced up and down for a minute. Then he growled,

"Now what, Johnny?"

"Frankly, Sam, I don't know. For once I'm stumped. I can't figure it out."

"Why don't you run over it again? I probably can't help you, but you usually get ideas when you're talking."

Johnny smiled faintly. "You're over wanting to back out?"

Sam snorted. "Have I ever quit when the going was really tough? I'm not going to like this place even when everything's washed up, but right now — the washing's still to be done."

"Right, Sam. I had Potts figured for it. He was your uncle's attorney and probably knew a lot of things about him that he could have used. Then he lied about Webb and the Pendletons. He said the money had been paid back to your uncle. The note proves that it hadn't."

"That makes it sound like Potts was in with the Pendletons," Sam said. "That crowd's mean enough for anything. They had a fifty-grand stake in the business."

"I haven't forgotten that. And it would account for their wanting to knock off Potts. Binns — well, they knew the note was still in existence and they wanted to search for it. Tear it up and they were fifty thousand ahead."

"But why'd they wait until now? They had a month before we showed up."

"That's what annoys me about the Pendletons. They're not lads who'd put off a fight until tomorrow that they could have today. Which brings us down to Mr. James Webb. That airport story is full of holes."

"Huh? I heard what you said out in the barn, but I didn't get it."

"The T.A.A. bought a site for an airport a week ago. You know, Sam, I've been wondering for the last day or two just how Webb gets by. What he does for a living. I think I'll find out."

"Might be a good idea, Johnny, but he don't strike me as the killer type. Now you take the Pendletons or — yeah, I almost forgot Pete Suratt! What about him?"

"Suratt won't live to die of old age. But if he killed your uncle before he got his thirty-two thousand, he was a sap."

"I'm still sore where that she gorilla banged me. I'd like to meet Suratt when he hasn't got his hardware on him."

"So would I, Sam. That pleasure may be denied us, I'm afraid."

Outside, an automobile horn tooted: "A-beep-a-beep!"

Johnny blinked. "For the love of Cleopatra, what's that?"

Sam started for the window. "Cripes, it sounds like — it *is*, Johnny. That millionaire Faraday, in his road yacht!"

Johnny sprang to his feet and strode to the window. It was true. Martin Faraday had already climbed out of his car and was coming toward the front of the house.

Johnny met him at the door. "Faraday, old man, how *are* you?"

"So-so, Fletcher. I read in the papers about the little trouble

you had here last night."

"Last night? What do you think all those men are doing out by the kennels? We've had another."

Faraday gasped. "Another murder? You can't mean that!"

"I'm afraid we could. How's Iroquois the Ninth?"

"Iroquois? You mean Mohawk the Seventh. He's in St. Louis at a place. Havin' his fur brushed out, nails fixed up and stuff. Fine dog, Mohawk."

"He certainly is, Faraday. You wouldn't be interested in a mate for him, would you? Keep him from getting lonesome."

"As a matter of fact, I *would* be interested. That's really why I came back. You know I'm giving up my horses. Don't like the sort of people you meet at the track. I've been thinking for some time of getting a few dogs."

Johnny's eyes lit up eagerly. "That's the best news I've heard in a month of Tuesdays, Faraday. The breed needs a man like you to boost it. Why, if I thought we could have you show a few of our dogs at the eastern shows . . . yes, that *would* be worth something to us. You buy a half dozen of our animals and we'll make you a price that'd knock your eye out."

"You would? But a half dozen! I say, old man, I don't do things in fractions. Not ever. I was thinking of buyin' your whole bloomin' lot of dogs. Kennels and all."

Johnny saw Sam reel and catch the window sill for support. He felt pretty rocky himself.

"The entire business, *Mister* Faraday? I don't *know*, Mr. Faraday. We turned down a pretty handsome offer only recently. However, from a man of your caliber, a sportsman who'd continue the breed, why . . . we *might* consider an offer. What do you think, Sammy?"

Sam choked. "Glug-glug!"

"Well, now," said Faraday. "I've been thinkin' it over. The farm's no good at all and of course I'd have to build a new house, if I did decide to move out here, which I'm not too sure

about. But the dogs, well, that's what I'm mainly interested in. You have two hundred, I believe. Suppose we say a straight twenty dollars. Four thousand for the lot."

"Four thousand! You're joking, Faraday. You know there isn't a mu — dog here worth less than three hundred. You take Mohawk . . ."

"I have taken him. Ha-ha! Archibald was telling me of your little joke yesterday. He thought you'd robbed the bank."

"Ha-ha," Johnny laughed humorlessly. "I was just making a little deposit."

"Oh, were you? I stopped in at the bank on my way here. Only fifteen minutes ago." Faraday stopped and putting his tongue into his cheek, smiled.

Johnny had the grace to blush — a little. "I was having a little fun with Dunkel."

"Kunkel? Shall we stop for a minute, Fletcher? I inherited a little money, but I've doubled the amount — on my own. I checked into the situation before I came out. I know about the mortgage . . . and the bills. You couldn't sell two dogs around here at a forced sale. I'll take over your mortgage and give you two thousand over it."

"You said four for the dogs alone!"

"For the dogs alone. You owe three thousand in feed bills. I'll do you a favor; I'll take the farm and the dogs and the bills. All right?"

Johnny stared in astonishment. "And what do we get?"

"A box of aspirin. You haven't a chance in the world to catch up here. I admit you're pretty clever, Fletcher. The way you razzle-dazzled that banker was a honey. But can you do it again?"

"I'm full of ideas."

"Right. Then think up one to get you out of this. I'll be at the Coronado until tomorrow evening. Right?"

Johnny nodded gloomily and Faraday, saluting Sam, went out of the house. Johnny heard the beep-a-beep of the horn and went

to the window. Faraday's big car was rolling out of the driveway.

"If we collect the fifty thousand from Pendleton, I'm going to give Faraday the dogs," Sam Cragg said darkly.

"If we collect that dough, I'd pay Faraday to take this place," Johnny said. "I've never been as humiliated in my life as I have been here. I feel like picking a fight with Mike Pendleton — he's the biggest of the family."

"Bigger than Angus and Andy? They couldn't have another one like that in the family. By the way, how much does the sister weigh? About two hundred?"

"No. A little less." Under his breath, he added, "About ninety pounds less."

Georgie Tompkins came in by the front door. He leaned against the door jamb. "This ties it, Fletcher. I'm checking out."

"Don't bother me, Georgie," Johnny said impatiently. "I've got serious things on my mind."

"So have I. I need that money you stole from me. I'm going to New York."

"What's the matter with the Foreign Legion? There isn't a man in it who wasn't thrown over by a girl."

"I haven't been thrown over, Fletcher. Susan's coming to New York, too."

"Eh? She's going with you?"

"No, but she's coming later."

"What's her father say to that?"

"Susan's twenty-one. . . ."

"And so are you — you say."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Johnny snickered. "Nothing, sonny. When do you shove off?"

"As soon as you give me my money."

"And if I don't give it to you?"

"You've *got* to give it to me. It's my money. The railroad fare's thirty-nine dollars to New York and I need some money until I get started."

"Horatio Alger's boys never had any. *I* never had any. Many's the time I've hit New York without a dime."

"You said it, Johnny," Sam agreed.

Johnny grinned crookedly. "Stop at the 45th Street Hotel. Mention my name . . . and they'll throw you out."

"This isn't anything to joke about, Fletcher. Give me that money or — you'll be sorry!"

"All right, I'm sorry. But I've still got the dough. You pinched it from the old man, anyway. The money belongs to Sam."

"If he'd left a will, Cragg wouldn't have got the sleeves from his old vests," Georgie said bitterly.

Sheriff Lindstrom rang the front door bell and immediately pushed open the door. "We're going now, Fletcher. But I wouldn't figure on taking any trips if I were you."

"Did you lock the dog barn?" Johnny asked scornfully.

Sheriff Lindstrom went out without replying to that. Johnny turned to Georgie Tompkins, "Say, I just happened to think of something. What business is Susan Webb's father in?"

"None. He's retired."

"From what?"

"From making money. He's got plenty."

"Then why was he so anxious to close that airport deal?"

"*You* worry about that, Fletcher. I'm not passing out information." He hesitated uncertainly a moment, then went to the stairs and began climbing them.

Sam waited until Georgie had gone out of sight, then said to Johnny: "You s'pose he's really going to light out?"

"I don't think so, Sam. You know, I keep missing something. It's about Susan. What hold's the kid got on her? She's not in love with him, yet — she strings him along."

"You said something about a mother instinct the other day."

"N-no, I don't think. She's too young to be that maternal. But with her looks, she'd have no trouble getting a hundred men, older than herself. Girls that age like their men mature. . . ."

He grunted and stepped to the hall telephone. Looking up the number of the Webbs he rang it. Susan answered the telephone.

"Johnny Fletcher, Susan. Mind if I ask you something personal? Are you in love with Georgie Tompkins?"

He heard her gasp, then she repied: "I think that's too personal a question to ask, Mr. Fletcher."

"Maybe so. Only reason I ask, the kid insists he's going to light out for New York. Did you know that?"

There was a short pause, then, "Yes."

"Are you going to New York — later?"

Again the pause before she answered, "Yes."

Johnny was about to pursue the subject further, when Susan said, coolly, "Good-bye!" and hung up.

"Sam," Johnny said, "I'm getting sore. For two days people have been pushing us around. They've been dumping corpses all around us and I'm getting fed up."

"Here it comes," said Sam.

"Here we go! We've been fighting a defensive battle up to now. It's time we took the offensive."

"Wait a minute, Johnny. I'll be right down."

Sam went upstairs, three steps at a time. He returned inside of a minute. Johnny saw the bulge in his right coat pocket. "Whoa, Sam, what you got there?"

"Where?"

"In your pocket. It's bulging — here!" He caught Sam's coattail and thrust his hand into the pocket. He brought out a pair of gleaming brass knuckles.

"Where'd you get these, Sam?" he gasped.

"Off a guy in Coyle's Pool Room on Broadway. Couple weeks ago. I was playing Kelly pool and this shark rang in some extra

pills. I slapped him and he came at me with these. I been keeping 'em for a souvenir."

Johnny slipped the knuckles on his right hand and clenched it into a fist. He swished the hand through the air. "Don't you know you can't carry these things, Sam? They'd jug you as quick as catching you with a rod. . . ." He recalled the facetious remark he had made to Jill Pendleton about brass knuckles.

Sam shrugged. "I don't need them. Throw them in the fireplace."

Johnny dropped them into his own pocket. "I'll throw them away on the road. Come on."

They were approaching the garage before Sam became aware of the absence of the station wagon. "The punk took the bus!"

"The punk's in the house," Johnny said. "I didn't bring the station wagon home with me."

"Why not? Where'd you leave it? . . ."

"In front of the Pendleton factory. Mike Pendleton rammed it with his jalopy."

"And you let him get away with it?"

"You saw Angus and Andy. They're the sissies of the family. Wait'll you meet Mike. In fact, *you* meet him. If I never see him again, that's too soon."

"Huh? Is he nine feet tall and eight feet broad? Does he weigh more than four hundred pounds? If he doesn't, I'll tell him a thing or two."

Johnny was climbing into the limousine when a thought struck him. "Sam, these jalopies — we overlooked them. We could have raised a few hundred on them. Maybe a grand, even. Of course it doesn't matter now, since we're going to collect from the Pendletons."

"Is that where we're going now?"

Johnny frowned. "Not just yet. I thought I'd check up a little first on Mr. Gerald Potts."

"But he's dead."

"Sure, but Riley, Ryan and Riordan are still alive. Potts was only Number Four in the firm."

Sam brightened. "I never trusted that Potts. I got an idea some of Uncle Julius' dough stuck to his fingers."

"Maybe so. We'll look into it."

By now, Johnny was familiar with the drives into St. Louis and he made the trip in quicker time than on the other occasions. He parked the limousine in the parking lot on Washington and they walked to the offices of Riley, Ryan, Riordan and Potts.

The platinum-blonde receptionist had a red nose. She had been crying.

"Hi, Yvonne," Johnny greeted her cheerfully. "Why the tears?"

"*You* ought to know," the girl replied bitterly, "Mr. Potts. . . ."

"We've all got to go," Johnny said philosophically. "Why, I might step out of this office and be rolled over by a street car. Or Mrs. Potts might have come into your apartment some time and . . ."

"What?"

"Excuse me," Johnny murmured.

"He was divorced years ago."

"And no one dragged him up to a J.P. again? A big lawyer like him with scads of lucre."

"Mr. Potts wasn't a wealthy man. And I don't think I care for your remarks about him. Now that I think of it I don't care for you, either. Mr. Potts didn't like you."

Johnny caught a whiff of Yvonne's breath. "What we ought to do," he said softly, "is drown our sorrows in a good, big drunk!"

Her overbright eyes flashed up at him. "Mister," she said, "you said a mouthful!"

"I certainly did. But first of all, I'd like a word or two with Mr. Riley."

"You'll have to write him a letter — on asbestos. Mr. Riley's been dead four years. They just keep his name in the firm because they've got a lot of old stationery on hand."

"How about Ryan?"

"Ryan's our Chicago man."

"I'll try one more Irishman — Riordan?"

"Uh-huh, he's here. Y'want to see him?"

"Not necessarily. I could talk to him through a curtain."

"Wise guy," sniffed the fair Yvonne. She got up and went into an office. She was gone almost two minutes. When she came out she said, out of the side of her mouth. "He isn't happy about it, but he'll talk to you."

Johnny walked into Mr. Riordan's office and found a roly-poly, red-faced man behind a huge, mahogany desk. "And sure, 'tis a pleasure to shake your hand, Mr. Riordan," he greeted the attorney in a tenor dialect.

Mr. Riordan's red face turned redder. "Gerald told me about you. Do you do card tricks, too?"

Johnny chuckled. "I hate to speak ill of the dead, Mr. Riordan, but you were his partner so you must have known that Potts was a crook."

"Get the hell out of here!" snarled Riordan.

"I will," said Johnny, "but the cops'll be here ten minutes after I go. Potts was the executor of Julius Cragg's estate and he was skimming the pot. You were his partner and — "

"Not in that I wasn't," howled Riordan. "Potts was the sole executor of that estate. He handled it all by himself. I don't know a thing about it."

"There's a little matter of fifty grand. My friend here's the heir and he's beefing about the short change."

"Yah," said Sam Cragg. "I want my dough."

"I haven't got the money," said Mr. Riordan, somewhat desperately. "If the estate's short it's got nothing to do with me."

"It'll get in the papers. The law firm of Riley, Ryan, Riordan and Potts — "

"What do you want?" Riordan cried.

"Fifty grand," growled Sam Cragg.

"I haven't even got fifty dollars. Business is bad. I'm figuring on chasing ambulances next week."

Yvonne poked her head in the door. Her hat was on her head, a little askew. "I'm going now, Mr. Riordan," she announced.

"So'm I," said Johnny Fletcher. "You think it over, Mr. Riordan. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

In the outer office, Yvonne said, "I'm going out to take your advice — get drunk."

"We'll help you," Johnny offered.

"Come on."

Riding down in the elevator, Johnny said to Yvonne, "So Potts was tapping Uncle Julius' dough?"

"Riordan blabs too much," Yvonne snapped. "What if he was taking a little money? It didn't hurt Cragg any. He's dead."

"But I'm alive," said Sam. "The dough's supposed to come to me."

"What would you do with it?" Yvonne asked.

They left the building and Yvonne led the way across the street to a cocktail lounge. The three of them crowded into a tiny booth.

When the waiter came Yvonne said recklessly, "Double Scotch and as soon as it's empty, bring another. And keep on bringing them."

"Wait a minute," Johnny said, "this is Dutch treat."

"Dutch treat? You piker. You expect to pump me and then make me pay for my own drinks?"

Johnny grinned at the waiter. "Bring the double Scotches. We'll have the same. . . . So you figure I'm trying to pump you?"

"Aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. Potts was robbing the estate, wasn't he?"

"What estate? Two hundred barking elephants? There wasn't any money to speak of. A measly five or six thousand."

"But Potts helped himself to that?"

"The court would have given him most of it for acting as executor."

"Maybe," said Johnny. "Now, look, you were Potts' secretary, at least — "

"Where do you get that 'at least' stuff? I was his secretary."

"Okay. So you knew his business. About this loan Julius made to Andrew Pendleton about a year and a half ago . . ."

"Pendleton paid it back."

"Hey!" cried Sam Cragg. "He didn't — "

Johnny cut him off. "When did Pendleton pay it back?"

"The day before Julius was — before Mr. Cragg died."

Johnny stared at her for a moment. Then he shook his head. "What do you know about Pete Suratt?"

Yvonne winced. "Nothing, except that he's bad medicine."

"That's what everyone says about him. I'm getting tired of hearing it. Where does he come into the picture?"

"Mister, you're no more tired of Suratt than I am. He gave me the creeps every time he came into the office."

"The office! What'd he come there for?"

"He wanted to know when the heir showed up. He figured to collect some money from him that he claimed Julius had owed him."

"So that's who sicked Suratt onto us. Potts. . . ."

"I shoulda poked him in the nose," Sam Cragg growled.

"Poked who?"

"Your boss, Potts."

Without warning the platinum-blonde Yvonne burst into tears. The waiter came hurrying over. "What's the idea?"

"Go water your beer," Johnny snapped.

"You can't cut up in here," the waiter said angrily. "This is a respectable place and we don't allow any rough stuff."

Yvonne wailed.

"Cripes," said Sam, "she musta been soaked to the ears before we came in here. The double Scotches couldn't have hit her so quick."

Johnny squirmed out of the booth. He dropped a couple of bills on the table. "Come on."

"You're not going to leave *her* here?" the waiter cried.

"Why not? We met her here."

"You didn't. You brought her in with you."

"She brought us in. I figured she was working here."

"We don't have percentage girls. This is a respectable — "

"I know, a respectable joint. Then telephone Riley, Ryan, Riordan and Potts across the street. She works there."

Yvonne reached High C in a shriek as Johnny and Sam hurried out of the café.

"I hate a woman who can't hold her liquor," Johnny complained.

"Me, too," agreed Sam. "I didn't like that dame anyway. She helped Potts spend Uncle Julius' dough."

"That's what she's bawling about now more than anything else. Because there isn't any more money."

"Where do we go now? Home? . . ."

"Gosh, no. There are still things to do. . . . How would you like to meet Jill Pendleton?"

Sam grimaced. "What for? I've seen her brothers. That's enough for me."

"Umm. I think you ought to see her anyway. Give you a better opinion of the Pendletons."

"A two-hundred-pound female? Maggie was enough to hold me for a while."

"Tsk, tsk. Wait out here while I make a phone call. Without waiting for a reply Johnny darted into a drugstore. He consulted the telephone directory and found that an Andrew Pendleton lived on McCausland.

He went into a booth and called a number. A familiar voice answered the phone.

"This is the preacher man," he chuckled. "How are you-all, honey?"

"I'm fine, but you won't be," Jill Pendleton retorted. "Not if Mike catches you. That was a dirty trick."

"You don't know the dirty trick he pulled on me. . . . Any of your men folks home?"

"No. Pop just telephoned from the convention. Said they'd have their dinner there. If you know what I mean."

"Uh-uh. What're *you* having for dinner?"

"Is that just curiosity, or an invitation?"

"An invitation. Put on a bonnet and meet me somewhere."

"Can't. Mom wants me to stay home for dinner."

"Well, how about just running out and having a drink?"

"What's the percentage?"

"My pal, Sam Cragg's with me. Like you to meet him."

"What for? From what you've told me about him, he isn't any more than my brothers are. I see them often enough."

"Sam's better than they are. Anyway . . . I'd like to show you something. A promissory note made out to Julius Cragg and signed by your father. . . ."

He heard her inhale softly. Then she said: "Where are you?"

"I'll meet you at the place we were this afternoon. And don't bring your family. Promise?"

"All right. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Johnny hung up and left the booth. He stopped just outside to consult the classified telephone directory and wrote an address on an old envelope.

When he came out to the sidewalk, Sam Cragg was worried. "You'll say I'm nuts, Johnny, but I saw Pete Suratt drive by."

"You *are* nuts, Sam. Pete wouldn't be within miles of here. Or, would he? Anyway, we're going to run up to Grand and meet Jill Pendleton."

"And her whole family?"

"No, Jill alone. I want to find out something from her. She'll talk."

"They all talk, when you start on them, but me, I'd just as soon

kill time by myself as gab with a Pendleton woman."

"Phooey. Come on."

They got the car out of the parking lot and drove leisurely to Grand Avenue. Johnny found a place to park only a short distance from the bar he had patronized with Jill earlier in the day. They climbed out and went in.

Jill Pendleton was already sitting at the bar.

"Hi, pal!" she greeted Johnny flippantly.

"Yowsah! This is my pal, Sam Cragg. Sammy, the sister of the Pendletons." He grinned at his friend.

"Jeez!" was all Sam could say at the moment.

"Two more daiquiris," Jill said to the bartender. Then to Sam. "You're not even as big as Angus, to say nothing of Mike. I don't believe it."

"Jeez!" Sam repeated. "You didn't tell me, Johnny."

"You wouldn't have believed me."

"What're you two talking about? Me?"

Johnny nodded. "Sam wants to know if you've got a sister."

"I might dig up a girl friend . . . some other time. You said you had something to show me."

Johnny took the promissory note from his pocket. As he started to unfold it, Jill Pendleton made a sudden lunge for it. Johnny almost fell off his stool trying to dodge her. He chuckled. "You Pendletons. . . ." Then holding one hand in front of him to ward her off, he held the note so she could read it.

"Is that your old man's signature?"

Jill Pendleton frowned. "It looks like it, but it must be a forgery. Pop paid back that money."

"Now look, pal," Johnny said. "Your old man knows the score. And how he knows it! D'you think he's the kind that would shell out fifty grand without getting back his I.O.U.?"

"He trusted Julius Cragg."

"Come again, pal."

"Then it's a forgery. It must be. What's you figuring to do with it?"

"What would you do in our place?"

"I guess I'd try to collect."

"For cash we'll knock off ten per cent," Sam Cragg said. "And if you dig up the girl friend, I'll personally knock off another two per cent."

"If my brothers catch you they'll knock off your head, Mister," Jill Pendleton declared. "And as for you, Johnny Fletcher, I don't think I like you as much as I did this afternoon."

"Business is business, pal," said Johnny. "After all, your family's in wheat and me and Sam are standing in the breadline. Besides . . . Sam's uncle was killed. Remember? And a couple of people since. Although one of them was a lawyer and doesn't count."

Jill slid from the chair to the floor. "I think I'll go."

"No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings. But you haven't got the money yet. Don't go buying grand pianos."

"Speaking of grand pianos, what're you doing tomorrow night?"

"And the girl friend?" Sam added.

"My girl friend's got the measles and I'm going to help her tomorrow night."

Johnny looked at her regretfully. "Tell your father we'll knock off twenty per cent."

"Good-bye, boys."

Johnny shook his head as Jill Pendleton left the bar. "Jeez," said Sam, "imagine her having those brothers . . . and an old man."

"She did that awfully convincing," Johnny said.

"Huh?"

"The sob stuff. Defending her father. If I didn't have this chunk of paper I'd almost believed her. Well, come on, Sammy, we've got to do our homework."

Outside, Sam said, "What homework?"

"Burglary. We're going to burgle the Pendleton factory."

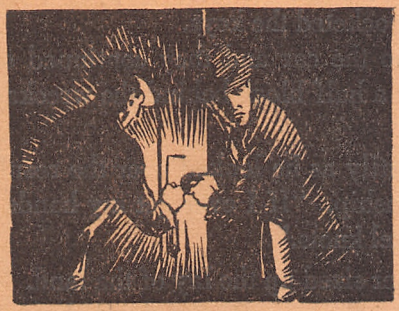
Sam gasped. "Are you crazy? Even if they are all at the convention, they'll have a night watchman at the plant."

"Yeah, I guess so. That's why I looked up an address. It's right here on Olive Street, up a little ways. All I want is to get into the place and have a quick look at their books."

"But the watchman!"

"I've got that figured out. Come on."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



FIVE minutes later, Johnny parked the car near Tower Grove.

"You wait here," he said to Sam. "I'll only be a minute."

He entered a shop which had a sign on the door: "Lost your key? I'll make you a new one."

A bald, cadaverous-looking man with grimy hands came forward behind a counter.

"I lost my key," Johnny said brightly.

"What kind of lock is it?"

"A big one."

"Yale lock or an old-fashioned kind?"

"Why, I never noticed."

"Certainly you know if it was a tumbler lock, using a small flat key, or the old-fashioned kind of lock that uses a big key."

"As a matter of fact," said Johnny. "I'm a burglar and I didn't case this joint very well."

"Burglar," grunted the locksmith. "This isn't April fool's day. Do you want a key or don't you?"

"Sure I want a key. I want several keys. Skeleton keys that'll fit different kinds of locks."

Annoyed, the locksmith brought out a box and sorted out six

keys. "These'll fit just about any kind of lock there is. One dollar apiece or six for five dollars."

"Sold. I'll take them all." He dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter and pocketed the keys.

He returned to the car and they continued on to Kingshighway. He parked a half block behind the wreckage of the station wagon.

Sam swore lustily as he looked over the results of Mike Pendleton's roadmanship. "If I ever get my hands on that guy I'll tie him into pretzel knots."

Johnny Fletcher sized up the lay of the land. "This is going to be a job of timing, Sammy. One of the skeleton keys ought to fit the lock and we shouldn't have any trouble getting into the joint. The idea's not to waste any time inside. I want to find their books and take a quick look in the time it takes the watchman to get to the convention hall and back again."

"Huh? How do you know he's going to the convention hall?"

"We're going to make him go there. Now, you know how the Pendletons talk. You imitate one of their voices. . . ."

"Me? Jeez, Johnny — "

"You've got to. I can't holler lough enough to imitate the Pendletons. Now, there's a drugstore right across the street. You go into the telephone booth and call the Pendleton Novelty Company. The only one that can answer is the watchman, so when he says hello you try your damnedest to break his eardrums. Mmm, tell him you're Mike and you want him to go to your desk and gather up all the whisky that's there and rush it right down to the convention hall. You've got to make it convincing. You know how to do that . . . plenty of noise and a lot of swearing — like the Pendletons. The watchman won't have the nerve to talk back. Catch on?"

Sam inhaled deeply. "If it's gotta be done, it's gotta be done!"

"It's gotta be done."

They crossed the street and Sam entered the drugstore. Johnny, watching from the sidewalk, saw Sam enter a phone booth and dial a number. Then he winced as Sam's bellow reached him clear out on the sidewalk.

"Listen, you sleepwalking fugitive from the W.P.A.," Sam boomed, "this is Mike Pendleton. I'm down at the convention hall and we've run out of whisky. Go over to my desk and pack up all the bottles you find there and run them down here to the hall, right away. Don't give me any of your goddam lip! I said, *right away!* The . . . place isn't going to walk away while you're gone."

Sam came out perspiration beading his forehead. "He tried to give me an argument, but I think he's going to do it."

Johnny looked at a clock in the window of the drugstore. "It's ten minutes after seven. He ought to be out in about five minutes. I figure it'll take him fifteen minutes to get down to the convention hall. Then fifteen to get back . . . no, I better not count on more than ten, because Mike might come back with him and he travels fast. That's twenty-five minutes altogether. . . . To be absolutely safe, we can't count on more than twenty minutes. . . . How's your nerve?"

"Not so good. How's yours?"

"Lousy!"

It was exactly six minutes before the night watchman came out of the front door of the Pendleton Novelty Company. He carried two huge cartons in his arms, and staggering to the curb with them called a taxicab.

The moment it pulled away, Johnny and Sam crossed the street. They approached the door and Johnny pulled out his newly purchased skeleton keys. The fourth one turned the lock and Johnny pushed open the door.

"Twenty minutes altogether now. Remember that, Sam."

They hurried through the reception room and entered the big office. Two night lights, one at each end of the room, were burning.

Johnny surveyed the office quickly. "The bookkeeper ought to be in the rear somewhere. I only hope they don't lock their books in the safe, at night."

They separated and started through the maze of desks. Inside of thirty seconds, Sam called to Johnny. "Here's a raft of books, Johnny."

Johnny hurried over and nodded in satisfaction. An open front steel cabinet contained a stack of thick ledgers. Johnny scanned the backs of them. "What we want is the book for February, 1939. . . . Uh, here it is!"

He dumped several ledgers to the floor and scooped up the one labeled February, 1939, tossed it upon a desk. He opened it and began skimming through the pages. Sam flicked on an extra light bulb to enable Johnny to see better.

Johnny swore. "Damn, this is 'Receipts.' We want 'Expenses' or 'Disbursements,' or whatever they call it. . . . "

Again he turned to the cabinet. The ledger he wanted was a thinner one than the other and was almost at the bottom of the cabinet. They lost precious minutes before Johnny slammed it on the desk.

He found the entry he had hoped not to find, on page two. It read simply: "*Julius Cragg*, $50,000."

"This blows it up, Sam," Johnny said, in disgust. "The Pendletons paid back the fifty thousand."

"I don't believe it, even if it says so in the book. The Pendletons are a bunch of liars."

All the lights in the big office went on at that moment and a voice from the door, roared: "Who's a liar?"

Johnny and Sam whirled. All the male Pendletons were swarming in — Andy, Senior and Junior, Angus and Mike. Young Andy and Angus had guns in their hands.

"*Reverend* Fletcher!" cried Mike. "Well, well, you sinning old devil. Taking up burglary now, are you?"

"The guns, Johnny," Sam said thickly. "Will they? . . ."

"I'm afraid they would, Sam," Johnny replied soberly. He looked worriedly at the advancing phalanx of Pendletons. "How'd you get here so quick?"

Mike Pendleton snickered. "Uncle Alex in the drugstore across the street. He heard your stooge impersonating me to get the watchman out of the place. He telephoned the hall to say burglars were breaking in. Cripes, Fletcher! I guessed it was you right away. After Pop told me about you."

Johnny couldn't help grinning. "How'd you make out at the Coronet, Mike?"

Then he saw the five scratches on Mike's face. The youngest of the Pendletons advanced upon Johnny. Johnny tried to back away, but a desk prevented his escape. Mike suddenly lashed at him with his open palm. Johnny ducked and the blow caught him on the shoulder and smashed him to his knees. Mike reached down and caught his necktie — and some of his shirt — and yanked him to his feet.

"Reverend Fletcher! Make a monkey out of me, hey?" He slapped Johnny again and muscles away down in Johnny's legs quivered from the shock.

"You were going to buy two hundred Whizbangos, eh?" Mike went on. "And a flock of bandits and you saved souls on Sundays and on weekdays you ran a route to save your own soul? Boy, you kill me!" He whacked Johnny again.

To save wear and tear Johnny went down to his knees and stayed there. When Mike tried to snatch him up, he flattened down to his stomach.

"Not here, Mike," Old Andrew Pendleton said. "They can hear him yelling outside. The saloon's the place to question them."

Mike kicked Johnny playfully in the ribs. "Get up, Reverend. You don't drink, eh? But come and see our private saloon, anyway, huh?"

He kicked Johnny again. Johnny got up and headed for the

door leading to the inner offices. Sam fell in beside him, growling and snarling. The Pendletons brought up the rear.

"Right through to the rear," Pendleton Senior ordered.

At the far end of the office was a heavy oaken door. Painted on the panels were a foaming glass of beer, a tilted bottle and several small glasses.

"Right inside, boys," said the head of the Pendleton family.

Johnny opened the door. He shook his head slightly. The interior looked like a saloon, all right, an expensively furnished saloon, only a little smaller than the average public place.

The bar was about twelve feet long, complete with shining brass rail and cuspidors. The back bar was heavily adorned with bottles, bearing different labels.

"Not bad, eh?" Pendleton said proudly. "We keep it for our customers."

"Well, that's one way of selling," Johnny said. "Get them drunk and they'll buy anything."

Mike Pendleton roared. "Ain't he a card! Boy, he kills me!" He almost killed Johnny with a blow between the shoulder blades that knocked Johnny against the bar.

"Just a minute, Mike," said the young fellow's father. "We need him to do a little talking. How about it, Fletcher?"

"I'll talk," said Fletcher. "Before you came in I called the cops. They'll be here any minute."

Pendleton Senior shook his index finger chidingly. "Now, now, mustn't tell lies. Burglars don't call cops. I hear you've found the promissory note. Where is it, Fletcher? Save you a lot of trouble."

"My lawyer has it. And it's going to cost you fifty grand."

"It isn't going to cost me anything. I paid back that money and I'm not going to be made a sucker of by a couple of amateur slickers from New York."

"Why make yourself hoarse, Pop?" asked Angus, the night-club owner. "We'll beat it out of him."

"You know I don't like rough stuff, Angus," said Pop Pendleton. "Not unless it's necessary. But we might try searching them both."

"I'll search the Reverend," Mike volunteered. He put out his meathook and wrapped it around Johnny's throat. Holding him steady he went through Johnny's clothes with his other hand. He tossed the hundred and eighty-eight dollars Johnny had taken from Georgie on the bar, added seventeen dollars and some change that Johnny had over from his race-track profits and then piled up the other junk from Johnny's trousers pockets. A handkerchief, keys, matches and a wallet containing a California driver's license. Johnny hadn't been in California in three years, hadn't owned a car in months.

Then Mike started on the coat. The first thing he produced was the brass knuckles.

"Holy Moses!" he cried. "Look at these knuckle dusters." He tightened his fingers about Johnny's throat until Johnny was gasping for air. "Why, Reverend, is this the kind of prayer book you use down in Alabamy?"

He slipped one of the knuckles over his fingers, shook it down over the knuckles and rapped Johnny lightly on the chin. Johnny's knees buckled and that was all he knew for a little while.

When he regained consciousness there was sawdust on his face and a brass cuspidor was within three inches of his head. He stirred and a hand caught hold of him and whisked him up to a sitting position, with his back against the bar.

"Gee, Reverend," Mike Pendleton said, "I'm sorry about that. I thought you could take a *little* bit. . . ."

Across the room, Sam was backed against the wall. There was blood on his chin and a glow in his pale blue eyes. A yellowish glow.

Angus Pendleton wore the brass knuckles on both hands and Pop Pendleton had an old reliable blackjack in his hand. The

guns had been stowed away. Evidently the Pendletons didn't intend to kill them — not the easy way.

The oldest Pendleton came over and spreading his feet wide apart looked down at Johnny.

"We mean business, Fletcher. Fifty thousand is a lot of money to pay twice."

"Change the record, Pendleton," Johnny said wearily. "I've got the note, which proves you didn't pay back the money and you can talk until you're green in the face and you can bat us around — "

"We don't want to bat you around. And I don't give a damn what the note proves. I paid that money back to Julius Cragg. He pulled a fast one on me and then double-crossed me by getting himself killed.

A faint glimmer of intelligence came to Johnny's eyes. "Say that again — about paying back the money. You almost sounded like you meant it."

"I do mean it. I've been telling you for days. I paid back that money the day Cragg was killed. He telephoned me in a big rush. Said he'd lost a big bet to a gangster and if he didn't pay off right away, the fellow was going to take him for a ride. Well, we had the money so I took it out to him. And then he worked that razzle-dazzle on me. The note was in his safe-deposit box and he couldn't get it until morning. What was I to do? Let him get knocked off? I gave him the money. And then you and that big baboon came along and start bothering me for the money."

"You started it yourself, Pendleton. We'd hardly got here, than you busted out, yelling you didn't owe any money."

"That was after you telephoned. . . ."

"I didn't telephone you."

Pendleton winked. "You didn't telephone? Who the hell did?"

"That wise kid out at the place. He's been trying to stir up trouble from the start. He's sore that Julius died without making him his heir."

"Why, I'll slap his ears off!" cried Pendleton. "The little trouble maker. Julius told me about him. . . ."

"What? What'd Julius tell you about Georgie?"

"That he'd turned out rotten. I told Julius he didn't know how to handle him. Now, me, I've raised my kids the way they should be raised. . . ."

"You tell 'im, Pop," chuckled young Mike Pendleton.

"Attaboy," chimed in Andy Junior.

"You paid Julius Cragg fifty thousand in cash?"

"Of course. A red-hot like Suratt wouldn't take a check. After all, I trusted Cragg. He was smart and slick, but his word was okay. He was a bookie."

Johnny nodded. "But what became of the money?"

"How should I know? The bird who bumped him got it, I suppose. This Suratt — "

Pete Suratt pushed open the oaken door of the saloon and came in. A cigarette dropped from his mouth, a .38 automatic from his hand. The Pendletons began jumping around, but when Suratt waved the automatic at them, they became peaceful. Suratt said, "All right, I'll take over. I listened long enough outside."

"Suratt," said Johnny.

"Was that nice what you did to my cousin, Fletcher? I'm remembering that. I remembered it all day, when I laid out in your clover field watching the house with a pair of glasses. . . ."

Johnny gasped. "You watched the house all day?"

"Since seven this morning. I couldn't follow you when you left the first time, because there were too many cops around."

"You were watching the house at ten o'clock, or a little after?"

"I said I was. When I got money coming to me, I collect it."

"Just a minute, Suratt. You saw a red coupé drive up and wait there until I came home?"

"Of course. What of it?"

"Nothing about that. But just before the coupé, between the

time Cragg went to the house from the dog barn and when the coupé came, who came up then?"

"No one."

"Then you weren't watching. Potts, a lawyer, came up and was killed in the dog barn."

"Potts didn't come."

"But he was there!"

"Then he was there all night. I saw everybody who came and went from seven o'clock on. Potts wasn't one of them. I know Potts, through Julius Cragg. What about my dough, Fletcher? These birds here kicking through?"

"We've got a beef, too, if you want to know," growled the eldest Pendleton. "I gave Cragg fifty thousand the night he was killed and I didn't get my promissory note back. Fletcher and this Cragg have it somewhere."

"They've got my thirty-two thousand," Pete Suratt said. "Aside from that, Fletcher broke my cousin's jaw last night. You're a weisenheimer, Fletcher, I've been watching you. You're playing three-cushion shots and you're not Willie Hoppe. This is the payoff."

Johnny knew that it was. The four Pendletons had been lethal enough, but Pete Suratt and his gun were slow music and black mourning bands and a piece in *Billboard*, headed: "SHEETIE DIES."

Johnny thought about it for three seconds — three long seconds — and decided to make his big play. It had to work, or else.

"Look, Suratt, Julius Cragg had the dough for you. Fifty g's, that he got from these chumps. The guy who knocked off Julius got the boodle. I haven't got thirty-two thousand dollars, not even thirty-two hundred cents. But I'll give you the money with interest. All you've got to do is collect it."

"I'll collect it."

"On a promissory note? All legal and shipshape. The guy

who signed the note's got a nice, profitable business. . . ."

"Fletcher!" cried Andrew Pendleton, "What the devil are you talking about? My note?"

"Yes. I'm going to give it to Pete Suratt. You two can fight it out."

"You've got a note signed by this windbag?" Suratt asked. "For fifty grand?"

"Yes — if you can collect it."

"I'll collect it. Gimme the note and I'll call it quits."

"With Maggie, too?"

Suratt hesitated, then shrugged. "It won't cost her more'n a grand at the hospital. That'll still leave me seventeen grand — for the interest. Slip me the reader."

Mike Pendleton snickered. "He hasn't got it. I just got through searching him."

"You searched me, Mike. You didn't search yourself."

"Eh?"

"I said you didn't search yourself. Don't you think I knew what was coming when you started slapping me around? When you picked me up the first time I slipped the paper into your pocket."

Mike jammed his hands into both coat pockets. He brought them out and a small, folded bit of paper was sticking between his right fingers. Mike roared.

"Holy, Jumping Judas! I had the thing in my pocket all the day. Fletcher, you kill me! Ho-ho-ho!"

"Throw it over," said Pete Suratt.

"Go to hell," Mike Pendleton told him.

"I'll count two. One . . ."

Mike Pendleton popped the note into his mouth and Suratt shot him through the leg. Mike gasped and lunged forward. But his leg buckled under him and he pitched to the floor.

The remaining Pendletons roared and converged upon Suratt. The automatic exploded again and then Johnny heard a bone snap. Suratt screamed in anguish.

Johnny started climbing to his feet. By the time he completed the movement, Sam Cragg was in the fray. All Johnny saw for a moment or two, then, was a flying windmill of arms and legs and torsos. Old Man Pendleton hurtled out of it and landed up against the bar. Johnny swung at him, but missed because the old man fell to the floor before his fist could land.

Suratt, of course, was out of it by now. Mike had a bullet through his leg, but sat on the floor and tried vainly to get his hands on Sam Cragg.

Then the big scuffling stopped and Johnny Fletcher gasped in awe. He knew his friend's strength, or thought he had known it. But now — Sam Cragg had a headlock on each of the remaining Pendletons, Andy and Angus.

He stood with his feet braced wide apart, a huge head held firmly under each arm. It was exactly the position he usually wound up in, after his scuffle with the two "shills" who assaulted him during a book-selling pitch. The only difference was that the shills were broken-down ex-wrestlers . . . and they were being paid.

Angus and Andy Pendleton were simon-pure amateurs. They fought for fun . . . and anger. Yet Sam had vanquished them as easily as ever he had the paid stooges.

He grinned up at Johnny and then completed the old act. He brought his arms forward smartly. The big skulls of the Pendletons cracked loudly as they collided. Sam stepped back and let the Pendletons fall to the barroom floor.

"Jeez!" howled Mike Pendleton. "Jeez, if I on'y had my legs, I'd kill you."

"You'd get your head cracked, Mike," Johnny cried. "Sam Cragg's the strongest man in the world. . . ."

"It's a fake!" yelled Mike wildly. "No one man could lick both Andy and Angus."

"Then tell them to get up and try it again." Johnny moved forward. For a moment he stooped over Pete Suratt. Suratt

was alive, but an arm was bent grotesquely under his body. And a leg seemed to be out of position.

Johnny nodded. "That'll hold Mr. Suratt a while. And the Pendletons. By the way, Mike, where's the promissory note?"

"I swallowed it, what the hell'd you think?"

"Okay, Mike. You earned it. No hard feelings?"

"Come here and I'll break your neck. . . ."

"I wouldn't like that, Mike, on account of I like my neck. Be seein' you, Pal." He stepped swiftly to the door. When Sam Cragg joined him, he turned and chuckled.

"Boy, you kill me!" he said to Mike Pendleton.

They went through the deserted offices and left the building. As they climbed into the limousine, Sam said dourly:

"So we lose all around, eh, Johnny?"

"No, Sammy, we win. I know now who killed your uncle . . . and the others."

"Who?"

"You'll see, inside of an hour. Let me think, now. There are a couple of loose ends to figure out."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

IT WAS a few minutes after nine when Johnny drove the limousine into the yard. The dogs in the kennels were noisy. They were hungry.

Mrs. Binns was back in the kitchen. Her face was white and strained, but there was a determined look in her eyes. Johnny nodded quietly.

Georgie Tompkins was sprawled on the living-room couch again. But there was a suitcase in the hall. Johnny looked at it and went to the telephone.

"Sheriff's office," he said; then, "Sheriff Lindstrom? Johnny Fletcher. If you'll come right out here I'll tell you who killed Julius Cragg. Yeah, the others, too. I'm going to wash up the whole business. . . ."

He hung up, then made another call: "Mr. Webb? Fletcher across the road. Come over in five minutes and I'll tell you who killed all these people. Yes. Bring Susan along. I mean it. . . ."

He returned to the living room. Georgie Tompkins was standing with his back to a window, his mouth twitching. "You're crazy, Fletcher, you don't know a thing."

"I thought you were going to New York, Georgie?"

"I am, as soon as you give me back my money."

Johnny groaned. He had forgotten to retrieve the money Mike Pendleton had taken from his pockets. He didn't have a dime.

James Webb pushed open the front door without ringing the bell. Susan Webb was just behind him. They came into the living room.

"What nonsense is this now, Fletcher?" Webb snapped.

"Three murders isn't nonsense, Mr. Webb."

"You don't know who committed them."

"I'm afraid I do know, Mr. Webb. I almost didn't find out, though. Because you wouldn't tell the truth."

Webb reddened. "Look here, Fletcher, I've stood just about enough from you — "

"And me, from you, Webb," Johnny retorted. "If you hadn't beaten all around the bush in trying to get the farm, this business would have been cleaned up long ago."

"You're crazy, Fletcher. I don't want this farm."

"That's right, you don't. But if you bought it, you'd get rid of us — all of us. That's really what you wanted, wasn't it? You didn't want Georgie Tompkins around."

"There's been no secret about that."

"No, but you seemed to have thought it necessary to keep it a secret why you *really* disliked Georgie. Why you didn't want him around your daughter. . . ."

A siren screamed outside, rose to a high pitch and died out in a wail. Shoes crunched gravel and feet pounded up the short flight of front stairs. Sheriff Lindstrom burst open the front door.

"Who is it, Fletcher?" he cried. His eyes darted about the room and he blinked. "You're crazy! There's no one here — "

"The murderer's here, Sheriff!"

"What? Who? . . ."

"If you'll let me explain. I've got to start at the beginning."

"Go ahead, Fletcher," said Webb ominously. "But it better be good."

"That goes for me, too," growled the sheriff.

"I'll make it good," Johnny promised. "A month ago Julius Cragg was killed. That was the day he'd lost a big bet to Pete Suratt. For more money than he had available. Pete's a tough bird. He wanted his money right away, or else. Julius had put some money — fifty thousand — into the Pendleton Novelty Company, when the firm was hard up a year or so ago. Since then, they'd been doing well, so Cragg called Pendleton to help him out. Pendleton brought the fifty thousand in cash. But Cragg didn't return the note, he'd hidden it — as a matter of fact, he'd hidden the note in a dog's collar — Oscar, the yard dog, that was poisoned. . . ."

"What'd he do that for?" cried Sheriff Lindstrom.

Johnny shrugged. "Maybe he had a premonition. Anyway, he didn't want to get out the note. But Pendleton knew him well enough to trust him. After all, Julius was a well-known bookie. A bookie's word is good, as far as money is concerned. Pendleton left the money.

"Then Julius Cragg was shot. No one saw it. Georgie Tompkins said he was in the house when it happened, that he heard three shots and ran out and saw a disappearing taillight. The money was gone from Cragg's body. Whoever killed him took it."

Johnny paused and looked about the circle of faces. They showed absorbing interest.

"Whoever killed Julius Cragg took the fifty thousand from him," he repeated. "So far we're all right. We're wrong on just one point. Georgie's testimony. He didn't see any disappearing taillight. . . ."

"That's a lie, Fletcher!" cried Georgie.

"Well, maybe you did see a taillight, Georgie. Lots of cars pass here on the road. But the person who killed Julius Cragg didn't drive off in a car. Because *you* killed him, Georgie!"

Gasps went up around the room. They were punctuated by a

scream coming from Georgie's throat. He rushed toward the door, to get out of the living room. One of Sheriff Lindstrom's deputies knocked him back and Sam Cragg caught him in his tremendous arms. He held him kicking and screaming.

"Let me go, you big oaf! Let me go. It's a frame-up. You're trying to pin it on me. I didn't do it!"

"Oh, but you did, Georgie. Mr. Webb, just why did you object to Georgie having anything to do with Susan?"

Webb's face was taut. "Because the boy's a degenerate. He tortures animals. Julius himself told me about it. He'd caught him with a dog that he'd strapped up and was kicking to death. . . . Susan. . . ."

"I was afraid of him," said Susan, her lips trembling. "He — he threatened to kill me and himself. That day you came here, I'd gone to see Mr. Potts about Georgie. Mr. Potts . . . told me he was all right, but I didn't believe it. I knew . . ."

"That's all right, Miss Webb," said Johnny. "Potts had dipped his fingers into Julius' money. Potts was suspicious about Georgie. Julius had told him enough about the boy. He guessed that Georgie had the fifty thousand and he wanted to cut himself in for a piece of it. . . ."

"What I don't get," said Sheriff Lindstrom worriedly, "is why the kid didn't light out when he had the money?"

"Susan partly. His ego, partly. He's a supersmart kid. Thought he was putting it all over everybody. He got a certain pleasure out of sitting around, playing the big gentleman and gloating — "

"Fletcher, you — !" swore Georgie Tompkins.

Sam slapped his mouth.

Johnny went on. "Potts came out here, last night. Georgie told him he had the money hidden out in the dog kennels. Potts went out with him and Georgie got behind him and bashed in his head with a shovel or something. . . . By the way, Sheriff, didn't the autopsy show that Potts had been dead at least twelve hours before the body was found?"

"Yes!" exclaimed the sheriff. "The thing was driving me nuts. How'd the body get there this morning, if Potts was killed last night."

"Georgie had hidden it, probably in one of the feed bins. Apparently, Binns came into the kennels and saw something, so Georgie had to kill *him*. He wanted to confuse the issue, so he left Binns' body where it fell, but hid Potts', then poisoned Oscar to make it appear as if an outsider had come onto the place and committed the murder of Binns."

James Webb said: "I believe you, Fletcher. I'm sorry that I didn't before. I — I was half afraid right along that it was Georgie. That's why I was so anxious to get this place. I thought if I could buy it and pretend to sell it to an airplane company, I could get rid of Georgie right away."

The sheriff was scratching his chin. "But, Mr. Fletcher, haven't you got any real proof? Something we can use to pin it a little tighter? . . ."

"Oh yes, I was coming to that. In fact, without it I'd never have tumbled to the thing. This morning a whole bunch of people tramped through the dog kennels; you, sheriff, your deputies, the Pendletons. . . . None of you saw the body of Potts. Up to ten ten. Then Sam went into the house and five minutes later Kunkel came and sat outside the kennels for more than an hour. That means that Potts must have come here between ten ten and ten fifteen, entered the kennels and got himself killed. Those five minutes are blind minutes. Potts *could* have come here. Without a witness, it was a hole. Fortunately, I dug up a witness. . . ."

"Who?" cried both Webb and Lindstrom.

"Pete Suratt," grinned Johnny. "He was so determined to collect his thirty-two thousand, that he came out here at seven o'clock this morning and lay out there in a field all morning, watching the house with a pair of field glasses. He stated positively that Potts didn't come up today, that no one went into

the kennels from ten ten until around twelve when Georgie went in and came rushing out in a couple of minutes, yelling that someone had been murdered. . . . What Georgie actually did was to go into the kennels at that time, take out the body of Potts, whom he had killed the night before, and stretch it on the floor of the runway. . . ."

"You — !" screamed Georgie again. "All right, I did it. I killed them all. I outsmarted them and killed them. And I'll outsmart you, Fletcher. I've got the fifty grand, most of it left. It's hidden and you'll never find it. It'll rot where it is. . . ."

"It's blood money," said Johnny. "I wouldn't want it, anyway. Nor would Sam. . . ."

When they had gone and Johnny and Sam were alone, Mrs. Binns came into the living room.

"Mr. Fletcher, I — I wasn't going to say anything, but I've got to. I — I couldn't keep it. I found some money in Mister Georgie's closet this morning. Quite a lot of money. Almost a thousand dollars. . . ."

" 'Finders' keepers,' Mrs. Binns. You keep the money and keep quiet. Isn't that so, Sam?"

The money was legally Sam Cragg's, but he thought of Arthur Binns. He said: "You keep it, Mrs. Binns. You'll need that money, anyway, because — we're selling the farm."

"That's right," said Johnny. "In fact, I'm going to close the deal right now. I'll call Faraday."

He went out to the hall telephone. It was five minutes before he returned. Sam looked at him accusingly: "You made two calls. Why'd you call Jill Pendleton?"

"I'm going to see her tomorrow. She said the family's forgiven me . . . maybe. . . ." He thought of the two-hundred-odd dollars the Pendletons had taken from him.

Sam looked bitterly at Johnny. "You and your women!"

"You and your inheritance!" Johnny retorted. Then he chuckled. "You know this is really funny, Sam. We were hold-

ing heavy, we were *rich* and then you inherited a big estate. We take over . . . and we wind up broke. I guess we're about the only people who ever became poor through an inheritance!"

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